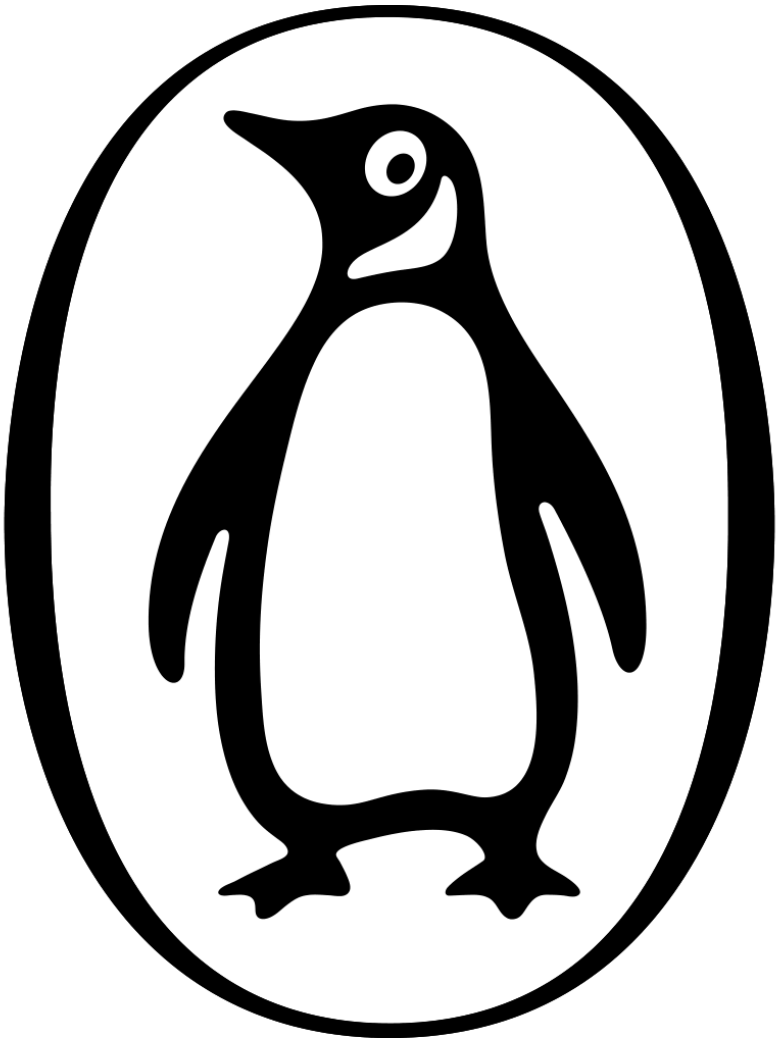

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

FARID UD-DIN ATTAR, the Persian mystic-poet, was born during the twelfth century at Neishapour (where Omar Khayyam had also been born) in northeast Iran. His date of birth is given by different authorities at various times between 1120 and 1157; the earlier date is more likely. He is said to have been educated at the theological school attached to the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashhad (a major centre of pilgrimage) and later to have travelled to Rey (the ancient Raghes, near modern Tehran), Egypt, Damascus, Mecca, Turkestan and India. After his wanderings he settled in his home town, where he kept a pharmacy, and it was there that he wrote his poems. Later in his life he was apparently tried for heresy; the charge was upheld and Attar was banished and his property looted. However, he had returned to Neishapour at the time of his death, which was probably shortly before 1220. His other chief works are *The Book of the Divine, The Book of Affliction* and *The Book of Secrets.*

DICK DAVIS was born in 1945 and educated at King's College, Cambridge, where he read English, and at the University of Manchester (Ph.D. in Persian Literature). He lived in Iran for eight years (1970–78) and has also lived in Italy and Greece. He is Professor of Persian at Ohio State University, USA. He has published six books of poetry, critical works and translations from Italian as well as from Persian. He translated *The Legend of Seyavash* by Ferdowsi for Penguin Classics, and also edited Edward FitzGerald's *Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam* for Penguin. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

AFKHAM DARBANDI was born in 1948 in Tehran, where she grew up. She trained as a nurse and then as a translator. She and Dick Davis were married in 1974.

FARID UD-DIN ATTAR

Translated with an Introduction by
Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Putnam Inc., 37 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

This translation first published 1984
28

Copyright © Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, 1984
All rights reserved

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

9780141920955

THIS TRANSLATION IS DEDICATED TO
THE MEMORY OF MARIAM DARBANDI,
1956–1983

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

BIOGRAPHICAL INDEX

INTRODUCTION

The Conference of the Birds (Manteq at-Tair) is the best-known work of Farid ud-Din Attar, a Persian poet who was born at some time during the twelfth century in Neishapour (where Omar Khayyam had also been born), in north-east Iran, and died in the same city early in the thirteenth century. His name, Attar, is a form of the word from which we get the 'attar' of 'attar of roses' and it indicates a perfume seller or druggist. Attar wrote that he composed his poems in his *daru-khané,* a word which in modern Persian means a chemist's shop or drug-store, but which has suggestions of a dispensary or even a doctor's surgery; and it is probable that he combined the selling of drugs and perfumes with the practice of medicine.

His date of birth is given by different authorities at various times between 1120 and 1157; modern writers have inclined towards the earlier date. Two manuscript copies of *The Conference of the Birds* give the date of its completion as 1177, and on internal evidence one would judge it to be the work of a writer well past his youth; this also suggests that a birth-date closer to 1120 than 1157 is likely. He is said to have spent much of his childhood being educated at the theological school attached to the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashhad (the largest town in northeastern Iran and a major centre of pilgrimage), and later to have travelled to Key (the ancient Raghes, near modern Tehran), Egypt, Damascus, Mecca, Turkestan (southern Russia) and India. Such itineraries are common in the lives of Persian poets of this period, and it was clearly usual for them, like their counterparts in medieval Europe, the troubadours and wandering scholars, to travel from place to place in search of knowledge or patronage or both. Attar's travels seem to have been undertaken more in the pursuit of knowledge than patronage; he boasted that he had never sought a king's favour or stooped to writing a panegyric (this alone would make him worthy of note among Persian poets). Though *The Conference of the Birds* is about the search for an ideal, spiritual king, Attar obviously had a low opinion of most earthly rulers; he usually presents their behaviour as capricious and cruel, and at one point in the poem he

specifically says it is best to have nothing to do with them. The knowledge he particularly sought was concerned with the biographies and sayings of Islamic saints; these he collected together in his prose work *Tadhkirat al-Auliya (Memorials of the Saints),* which became an important source book for later hagiographers.

After his wanderings he settled again in his home town, where he presumably kept his *daru-khané.* There is some evidence that late in his life he was tried for heresy – reading *The Conference of the Birds* it is not difficult to see why, though the accusation was made against a different poem. The charge was upheld, Attar was banished and his property was looted. Edward G. Browne* points out that this was a not uncommon fate for Persian mystical poets to endure, and that in his last book, *Lisanu'l Ghaib,* Attar 'compares himself to Nasir-e-Khosrow, who, like himself, "in order that he might not look on the accursed faces" of his persecutors, retired from the world and "hid himself like a ruby in Badakhshan".' *The Conference of the Birds* contains many anecdotes about sufis who suffered for their beliefs; and if Attar was attacked for his writings, the experience cannot have been a surprise to him.

However, he was back in Neishapour at the time of his death, which is variously given as having occurred between 1193 and 1235. One of the dates most favoured among early writers is 1229, the year of the Mongols' sack of Neishapour during their devastating sweep westwards, which took them to Baghdad and beyond. If Attar was born around 1120 he would have been well over a hundred years old at this time, and it seems more likely that his biographers have been seduced by the pathetic picture of the saintly old poet butchered by the barbarian hordes than that he actually did live so long. A date shortly before 1220 is more probable, though even this would mean that he was in his nineties when he died.

A memorial stone was erected over Attar's tomb in the late fifteenth century, and the site is still maintained as a minor shrine. (The tombs of Persian mystical poets have commonly become shrines; Ansari's tomb in Herat was once a magnificently adorned place of pilgrimage – it still exists in a more or less dilapidated state – and Rumi's tomb at Konya is to this day maintained in lavish splendour.) Both Attar's tomb and Omar Khayyam's were restored

in the 19305 –Attar's with rather more discretion than Khayyam's; the building that now houses the tomb is surrounded by a small garden.

The Conference of the Birds is a poem about sufism, the doctrine propounded by the mystics of Islam, and it is necessary to know something about this doctrine if the poem is to be fully appreciated. Sufism was an esoteric system, partly because it was continually accused of being heretical, partly because it was held to be incomprehensible and dangerous if expounded to those who had not received the necessary spiritual training. It was handed down within orders of adepts, who were forbidden to reveal the most important tenets of belief (though some occasionally did), from sheikh to pupil (throughout *The Conference of the Birds* the word 'sheikh' denotes a spiritual leader, not a secular chief). Different sufis living at different times have clearly believed different things, and most sufi authors tend to retreat into paradox at crucial moments, either because they feel their beliefs are genuinely inexpressible by other means or because they fear orthodox reprisal.

The doctrine is elusive, but certain tenets emerge as common to most accounts. These, briefly, are: only God truly exists, all other things are an emanation of Him, or are His 'shadow'; religion is useful mainly as a way of reaching to a Truth beyond the teachings of particular religions – however, some faiths are more useful for this than others, and Islam is the most useful; man's distinctions between good and evil have no meaning for God, who knows only Unity; the soul is trapped within the cage of the body but can, by looking inward, recognize its essential affinity with God; the awakened soul, guided by God's grace, can progress along a 'Way' which leads to annihilation in God. The doctrine received its most extreme expression in the writings of the Spanish Arab pantheist Ibn Arabi, a contemporary of Attar, who maintained that the being of creation and the Creator are indivisible. In *The Conference of the Birds* Attar frequently seems to be about to propound the same doctrine, only to step back at the last moment and maintain a final distinction between God and His creatures.

Attar's own connection with sufism is not entirely clear. It is not possible, for example, to identify incontrovertibly the sheikh from whom he received instruction, or even to state with certainty which order he belonged to. J. Spencer Trimingham, in his excellent book

The Sufi Orders in Islam (Oxford, 1971), says that his sheikh was Majd ad-Din al-Baghdadi (died 1219) of the Kubrawiya order; however, E. G. Browne quotes a Persian source to the effect that though Majd ad-Din was Attar's teacher it was medicine that he taught him, not the Way of sufism. There is another persistent tradition (first mentioned by Rumi, whom Attar is said to have dandled on his knee as a child and whose poetry is considered by Persians to be the *ne plus ultra* of mystical literature) that Attar had in fact no teacher and was instructed in the Way by the spirit of Mansur al-Hallaj, the sufi martyr who had been executed in Baghdad in 922 and who appeared to him in a dream.

The two traditions are not wholly exclusive; Attar may have belonged, to an order and have had a confirmatory dream in which Hallaj appeared to him. His collection of sayings and anecdotes connected with the lives of sufi saints, *Memorials of the Saints* (many such anecdotes also appear in *The Conference of the Birds),* suggests a bookish, rather scholarly man interested in the lives of those who had gone before him. My own guess – it is no more than that – is that the tradition of his instruction by the spirit of Hallaj is a dramatic symbol of his scholarly preoccupation with the lives of dead sufis.

Attar shows a particular interest in the lives of two sufis, al-Hallaj and Bistami (or 'Bayazid', as Attar calls him). Both, significantly enough, were representatives of the more extreme, antinomian and, to many of the orthodox, scandalous tendencies of sufism. Hallaj was a Persian who wrote in Arabic (Arabic occupied the position in Islamic Asia and Africa that Latin held in medieval Christian Europe, and many authors used it in preference to their own vernacular languages). He broke with the sufi tradition of secrecy and openly taught mystical doctrines; his most famous pronouncement, made while in a state of religious exaltation, was 'I am the Truth' (or even 'I am God': the relevant word, *haq,* can mean either 'God' or 'truth'). He was imprisoned for eight years, then tried and condemned to death; he was flogged, mutilated, hung on a gibbet and then decapitated; his body was burned and the ashes were scattered in the Tigris. Some of his followers fled to Khorasan (north-eastern Iran, where Attar was born), where his ideas were first incorporated into Persian verse by Abou Said Aboul Kheir; they became the staple of Persian mystical literature when they were

taken up by Sana'i, and after him by Attar and then Rumi. The statement 'I am the Truth' was considered a declaration of the non-existence of the Self which has been re-absorbed into the true reality, i.e. God; his death was seen as a warning of the world's hostility to sufism, which became ever more secretive, paradoxical and esoteric. The poet Hafez goes so far as to imply that Hallaj died because he had revealed what should be hidden; that is, though to the orthodox his death may have been a punishment for blasphemy, to the sufis it was a punishment for the revelation of a mystery.

Bistami or Bayazid (Bistam, which is about halfway between Rey and Neishapour, was his birthplace) was a famous ascetic associated with the 'ecstatic' rather than the 'sober' sufi path (the 'sober' way was associated with Junaid of Baghdad). Like Hallaj, Bistami is said to have attained a state of annihilation in God, and like Hallaj he proclaimed the fact in utterances that scandalized the orthodox ('Glory to Me! How great is My majesty!' – he claimed to have had a vision of the throne of God and to have seen himself sitting on it). However, he escaped outright condemna tion, perhaps by feigning madness, and died in 874 in Bistam. His tomb was made into a very beautiful shrine by the Mongol Ilkhan Uljeitu in the early fourteenth century; much of this shrine still exists. Attar is one of the chief sources for anecdotes about Bistami's life. Trimingham quotes al-Hujwiri, the author of one of the most important medieval texts on sufism, as saying that Bistami's teaching was 'characterized by *ghalaba* (rapture, ecstasy) and *sukr* (intoxication); whereas that derived from al-Junaid is based on sobriety *(sahw)'*. The two schools were not seen as opposed, and Attar mentions Junaid with respect, but he is clearly more taken up with the Khorasanian tradition; he was, after all, born in Khorasan and probably imbibed its particular emphases early in his education.

Sufism was never simply a doctrine to which one intellectually assented; it was also a discipline for life, and its adepts followed a carefully prescribed 'Way'. To quote Trimingham again, '[readers unacquainted with the writings of sufis] could have no better introduction than Attar's *Manteq at-Tair (The Conference of the Birds)* where the seven valleys traversed by the birds of the quest are: Search, Love, mystic Apprehension, Detachment/Independence, Unity, Bewilderment, and Fulfilment in Annihilation… The purpose of the discipline… is to achieve purification. The aspirant has: to

purify his *nafs,* i.e. his personality-self, from its inclination to *shahawat,* that is, the thoughts and desires of the natural man, and substitute these with love *(mahabba);* then he must be cast into the flames of passion *(ishq)* to emerge in the state of union *(wusla)* with transmutation of self (fana) through the gifts of dazzlement and wonder *(haira)* to everlastingness *(baqa).*' Attar's poem then is a description of the stages encountered by the adept of the sufis' Way.

A poet of the generation before Attar, Sana'i (who died around 1150, when Attar was probably in his twenties), had done more or less just this in his *Hadiqatu'l Haqiqat (The Garden of the Truth),* in which sufi doctrine is mixed with a great deal of extraneous matter. The poem is significant as being the first of the three famous long narrative Persian poems written in couplets which expound sufi teachings – the other two are Attar's *Manteq at-Tair* and Rumi's *Masnavi-e-Ma'navi* – but is by far the least popular of the three and owes its fame to chronological pre-eminence rather than to intrinsic excellence. E. G. Browne, with characteristic forthrightness, called it 'in my opinion one of the dullest books in Persian, seldom rising to the level of Martin Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy,* and as far inferior to the *Mas-navi* of Jalalu'd Din Rumi as is Robert Montgomery's *Satan* to Milton's *Paradise Lost'.*[*] This is an extreme view, but compared to Attar's work, Sana'i's is undeniably patchy and dull. Attar's great advance on Sana'i's beginning was to present the sufi doctrine in an extended allegorical form which is itself continually interesting and amusing, which has moments of great psychological insight, humour and narrative suspense, and which gives the poem – over its four and a half thousand lines – a convincingly unfolded narrative structure. In other words he has transformed belief into poetry, much in the way that Milton or Dante did.

The allegorical framework of the poem is as follows: the birds of the world gather together to seek a king. They are told by the hoopoe that they have a king – the Simorgh – but that he lives far away and the journey to him is hazardous. The birds are at first enthusiastic to begin their search, but when they realize how difficult the journey will be they start to make excuses. The nightingale, for example, cannot leave his beloved; the hawk is satisfied with his position at court waiting on earthly kings; the finch is too afraid even to set out, and so on. The hoopoe counters each of their excuses with anecdotes which show how their desires

and fears are mistaken. The group flies a little way, formally adopts the hoopoe as its leader, and then decides to ask a series of questions about the Way before proceeding. These questions are also answered by illustrative anecdotes. The last question is about the length of the journey, and in answer the hoopoe describes the seven valleys of the Way. The journey itself is quickly dealt with and the birds arrive at the court of the Simorgh. At first they are turned back; but they are finally admitted and find that the Simorgh they have sought is none other than themselves. The moment depends on a pun – only thirty *(si)* birds *(morgh)* are left at the end of the Way, and the *si morgh* meet the Simorgh, the goal of their quest.

Though Attar treats his material in an entirely different way from Sana'i, it is possible that a shorter poem of Sana'i suggested the device of the birds to him. In Sana'i's *Divan* there is a poem in which the different cries of the birds are interpreted as the birds' ways of calling on or praising God. A second source may have been *Kalila and Dimna.* This extraordinarily popular work, also called *The fables of Bidpai,* originated in India and was translated into many languages. The Persian texts of *Kalila and Dimna* which survive are relatively late prose versions, but Rudaki, who lived early in the tenth century and was one of the first poets to write in Persian, made a verse translation of the work, which Attar could have known. Significantly enough, Rudaki used the same couplet form as Attar was later to use for *The Conference of the Birds;* but a direct influence is impossible to prove, because all but a few fragments of Rudaki's poem have been lost. In *Kalila and Dimna* animals talk and act as humans; the fables usually have a moral point to them, and their narratives are allegories of human characteristics and failings. This is precisely the method of Attar's *Conference of the Birds,* and the two works also show a similar kind of folksy humour. Another work which probably influenced Attar when he came to write his poem is the short Arabic treatise *The Bird* by Avicenna. This is the first-person narrative of a bird (clearly representing the human soul) who is freed from a cage by other birds, and then flies off with his new companions on a journey to the 'Great King'. The group flies over eight high mountain peaks before reaching the king's court; there are a few moments when Attar seems to echo Avicenna's imagery.

The hoopoe in Attar's poem is presented as the birds' guide and leader; he is therefore the equivalent of a sheikh leading a group of religious adepts, or would-be adepts, along their path. His relation to the other birds is also Attar's relation to his audience: he expounds the doctrine they wish to hear and admonishes them to act on it. Attar very frequently gives the impression of merging his personality with that of the hoopoe; this is aided in Persian by the absence of punctuation, in particular quotation marks; a translator has to choose whether the hoopoe or the author is speaking, whereas Attar need not make this decision. Though the stories are ostensibly told by the hoopoe to birds they are in reality told by Attar to men, and the admonitions in them are almost always addressed to humanity, Attar's real audience, rather than to the hoopoe's fictitious avian audience. For example, Persian has a phrase exactly equivalent to the English 'Be a man!' (i.e. 'Pull yourself together and face danger bravely!'); Attar often uses this phrase because he clearly has his true, human audience uppermost in his mind rather than the birds to whom the stories are supposed to be addressed.

Most of the poem is organized around the hoopoe's answers to different birds' objections to the journey or questions about it. At the beginning the birds are identified by their species (and each species clearly indicates a human type: the nightingale is the lover, the finch is the coward, etc.); and they make excuses, according to their kind, for not going on the journey. Once the journey has begun the birds ask questions about its course, and here the analogy is much more that of a beginner on the spiritual path asking his sheikh about the trials he is likely to encounter. Each section (except for the opening and closing pages) therefore begins with a bird questioning the hoopoe (or arguing with him) and continues with the hoopoe's answer. Each answer usually contains two or three stories which illustrate the particular point the hoopoe is making; the stories are linked together by admonition and commentary.

Many of the stories at first reading seem obscure. This obscurity is certainly, in part at least, intentional; the reader is being asked to look at some problem in an unfamiliar way, and logic is often deliberately flouted so that we are, as it were, teased or goaded – rather than logically led – into understanding. The paradoxical

koans of Zen Buddhism are an analagous phenom enon. And, nearer home, Bunyan, in the prefatory poem to the second part of his *Pilgrim's Progress,* counters the objection that 'his words and stories are so dark / They know not how, by them, to find his mark' with lines that could well stand at the head of Attar's poem:

> And to stir the mind
> To search after what it fain would find,
> Things that seem to be hid in words obscure
> Do but the godly mind the more allure
> To study what those sayings should contain
> That speak to us in such a cloudy strain.
> I also know a dark similitude
> Will on the fancy more itself intrude,
> And will stick faster in the heart and head
> Than things from similes not borrowèd.

The obscurities are there to 'allure' the mind, and the ambiguities of the allegory are the 'dark similitude' which 'will stick faster in the heart and head'. For example, Attar will tell a story about two people, one of whom is clearly God, the other the aspirant sufi, but just as the reader has worked out which is which he will find that he has to change his mind or suspend judgement; the long story with which the poem closes is a good example of this. The reader's attempts to explain the allegory to himself are what make it 'stick fast'.

But though much of the poem is deliberately in a 'cloudy strain' it is certainly not meant to be read in a state of hazy unrelieved incomprehension. Some of what at first sight seems obscure will be clarified if the reader pays attention to the context of each story. (This is why it is not really a good idea to dip into the book at random; it is meant to be read through, at least section by section.) A good example of how the context clarifies meaning occurs when the hoopoe tells the tale of the poor fisherboy befriended by King Mas'oud (pp. 79–80); when the king casts the boy's line he is successful, and catches a great quantity of fish, which he gives the boy. The next day he makes the boy the partner of his throne. Out of context, the story, given that the reader knows it comes from a religious allegory, would probably be interpreted as a fable about God's grace. But if we put the story back into its context the allegory becomes more interesting. A bird has asked the hoopoe

why he (the hoopoe) is spiritually successful whereas all the other birds get nowhere. The hoopoe says it is because Solomon has glanced at him; he goes on to say that this glance is worth far more than prayer. However, this does not mean that one need not pray – on the contrary, one should pray unceasingly *until* Solomon glances at one. There follows the story of the fisherboy; we now see that the boy's constant fishing (he comes to fish in the same spot every day) represents the spiritual 'fishing' of constant prayer; the king's visit is the glance of Solomon. The story is about individual effort as well as grace and the fact that *both* are necessary for spiritual progress. If the point of a story seems elusive at first reading, it is usually a good idea to re-read the preceding few lines, or to refer back to the beginning of the section in order to remind oneself what question or objection the hoopoe is answering. Similarly, stories are often linked by a key word; sometimes this link will be a pun which subtly changes the direction of the argument, at other times it seems that, as in a comedian's patter, word which comes at the end of one story has simply reminded Attar of another story which depends on the same notion.

It is clear that certain of the beliefs central to sufism engaged Attar's imagination more than others. Two themes in particular are diffused throughout almost the entire poem – the necessity for destroying the Self, and the importance of passionate love. Both are mentioned in every conceivable context and not only at the 'appropriate' moments within the scheme. The two are connected: the Self is seen as an entity dependent on pride and reputation; there can be no progress until the pilgrim is indifferent to both, and the commonest way of making him indifferent is the experience of overwhelming love. Now the love Attar chooses to celebrate (and the stories that deal with love are easily the most detailed and the longest of the poem) is of a particular kind; it is always love that flies in the face of either social or sexual or religious convention. It may be love between a social superior and inferior (e.g. between a princess and a slave); it is very commonly homosexual love; or, as in the longest story of the poem (pp. 57–75, about Sheikh Sam'an), it may be love between people of different religions. In each case the love celebrated is seen by the world as scandalous (it may be objected that homosexual love was not seen by medieval Islam as particularly scandalous, but it is forbidden in the Koran (iv. 20), and in *The Conference of the Birds* the anecdote about Shebli in the

brothel (p. 93) shows that it was commonly thought of as shameful). The mention of scandal reminds us of the 'scandalous', i.e. blasphemous, aspects of the Khorasanian tradition of sufism to which Attar belonged; the 'scandalous' loves which Attar celebrates, their flouting of convention, are the allegorical counterpart of this spiritually 'scandalous' abandonment.

Attar's concern to demonstrate that the sufis' truth exists outside of human conventions also appears in his predilection for stories in which a poor, despised person (a dervish or beggar) is shown as spiritually superior to a great lord or king; and, in common with other sufi poets, Attar will use words like 'fool' or 'idiot' to mean 'wise man' or 'saint'. The most extreme examples of such an attitude occur in the section where he has pilgrims insulting God. Like many religious poets he loves paradox, as when he has a saint praying that God curse him (because the curse is God's and thus preferable to a blessing from any other source), and this is part of the same habit of mind – the need to insist that 'normal' apprehensions and expectations are questionable, to turn them inside out.

Readers acquainted with medieval European literature will not find Attar's method unfamiliar; parallels such as *The Owl and the Nightingale* and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* immediately suggest themselves. Indeed, it is remarkable how close Attar's poem frequently is in tone and technique to medieval European classics. Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* it is a group of stories bound together by the convention of a pilgrimage, and as in Chaucer's work the convention allows the author to present a panorama of contemporary society; both poems can accommodate widely differing tones and subjects, from the scatological to the exalted to the pathetic (and, occasionally, it must be admitted, the bathetic); both authors delight in quick character sketches and brief vignettes of quotidian life. With Dante's *Divine Comedy* Attar's poem shares its basic technique, multi-layered allegory, and a structure that leads us from the secular to the Divine, from a crowded, random world, described with a great poet's relish for language and observation, to the ineffable realm of the Absolute. And in the work of all three authors we can discern a basic catholicity of sympathy, at odds with the stereotypes of inflexible exclusiveness often associated with both medieval Roman Catholicism and medieval Islam.

To western readers Attar's misconceptions about other religions

may prove irritating; but his characterization of monasteries as places where orgies go on and good Moslems are led astray is after all no more grotesque than medieval Christian characterizations of what went on in Jewish communities. His obsession with idolatory is part of a general Islamic concern, but in *The Conference of the Birds,* as in a great deal of sufi poetry, the true idol to be destroyed is the Self. Of especial significance is Attar's use of the imagery of fire to indicate religious exaltation; pre-Islamic Iran had been Zoroastrian, and the Zoroastrians worshipped fire; the 'fire-worshippers' of Persian mystical poetry are yet another symbol for an antinomian religious fervour scandalous to the orthodox. In the same way Persian poets, including Attar, use the intoxication induced by wine – forbidden to Moslems – as a metaphor for the 'forbidden' intoxications of mysticism. In the story of the Arab who has all his goods stolen while travelling in Persia (pp. 176–7), the Arab represents the follower of the formal, outward path, of religion; the bandits are the sufis, who follow the inward path of mysticism and spiritual poverty; the wine which makes the Arab drunk and which enables the bandits to strip him of his outward wealth is the sufi doctrine.

Attar's language is, compared with that of many Persian poets, fairly direct and does not present too many difficulties for the translator. Persian lyric poetry is often a tissue of allusion and thus extraordinarily difficult to render into English; but this poem is a narrative, and whatever else is happening the translator has at least the story to convey. Attar is relatively sparing with metaphor, but a word or two about the use of metaphor in Persian verse will perhaps be helpful. Persian metaphors are rarely the visual images that English readers expect to find in poetry. Instead they juxtapose words which have potent associations in a way that deepens and widens the meanings implied by the passage. If the reader attempts to visualize the juxtaposition the result is often ludicrous. Henry Vaughan's poem 'My soul, there is a country' has a line, 'Sweet Peace sits crowned with smiles', which seems to me untypical of English metaphor (it is absurd to try and see a personified Peace with a crown literally made of smiles – what could such a crown look like?), but it would not startle a Persian poet. The metaphor works, if it works, by juxtaposing the associations of 'Peace', 'crowned' and 'smiles' to convey a notion of benign authority. This is exactly how most Persian metaphors convey meaning. Thus when

Attar compares the Prophet's face to the moon in one line and the sun in the next, he does not want his readers to visualize the result; rather he expects them to combine the notion of beauty associated with the moon and the notion of solitary splendour associated with the sun.

Most of Attar's metaphors are stock comparisons, and readers will soon realize that his descriptions of beautiful youths and maidens all use the same vocabulary and imagery. This is of course a common device used to unify long narrative poems –particularly epics – in many languages. Two other rhetorical devices deserve mention. One is common to a great deal of Persian poetry, the other is more typical of Attar himself. The first is hyperbole; most descriptions of love, sorrow, longing etc. in the poem will strike the western reader as, to say the least, very unrestrained. This hyperbolic language is normal in Persian verse, and, as with the metaphors, one should not be too literal-minded in one's response. To say that the moon is jealous of one's beloved's face or that one weeps blood rather than tears is clearly not to offer a literal explanation or description but to indicate the depth of emotion which makes one feel these things to be so. One of Attar's favourite devices is anaphora, the repetition of a particular word or phrase many times within a few lines, or sometimes over a more extended passage, e.g. 'Love's built on readiness to share love's shame; / Such self-regarding love usurps love's name' (p. 70). The effect produced is of an obsessive worrying of a concept; though this can sound peculiar in English, we have in general, though not in every case, tried to reproduce the device.

The anecdotes and stories are, as one might expect, easier to render in English than the passages of commentary and religious exhortation. The latter are often highly abstract, and they lack the human interest of the tales; a particular difficulty is that a great deal of the exhortation is written in the imperative mood, which is hard to sustain convincingly for long periods in English; and the negative imperative is especially awkward. However, we have in almost all cases resisted the temptation to omit these passages, and in the few places where we have done so no more than two consecutive lines have been cut; usually only one line is absent.

To translate a long, narrative poem into heroic couplets, a form associated largely with the eighteenth century, may seem to be an

undertaking that needs justification. However, it would, I believe, be perverse to translate this poem into any other form. Attar's metre is the common *masnavi* metre of Persian narrative poetry; the rhymes occur within the line, and each line has a new rhyme. Each line has, normally, twenty-two syllables, the rhymes occurring at the eleventh and twenty-second syllables. Almost all lines are end-stopped, i.e. the unit of sense is the same length as the line (there are perhaps twenty lines, out of over four thousand, in *The Conference of the Birds* which are not end-stopped). The proximity of this form to the English heroic couplet is immediately obvious. In general we have translated one Persian line by one couplet, though we have sometimes compressed two lines into one couplet. English heroic couplets are not normally as relentlessly end-stopped as Attar's Persian lines are, and we have tried to effect a compromise between producing a fairly normal English narrative flow and giving some idea of the more rigorously divided movement of the Persian. There is another less technical reason for the decision to reproduce the couplet form. As I have indicated, the subjects of Attar's poem are largely connected with the breaking of convention; in order for this to be effective and interesting the poem must be seen to be rooted in a fairly rigid convention, and the convention of the couplet is a formal paradigm of the conventions of the society Attar is writing about. If the reader considers this a doubtful or spurious point, let him consider the idea of such a poem written in free verse; all sense of tension, of struggle against a prevailing formality, would, I suggest, be dissipated by the openness of the form.

Further, narrative poetry depends on what the American poet Turner Cassity has called 'recitative'. We are used to short poems and expect them to function at a maximum of emotional intensity, like the arias of grand opera. One cannot maintain such intensity over hundreds of pages, and it would be wearying if one could. Narrative poetry needs its workaday recitatives between the arias, its simple conveying of the story from point a to point *b*. The heroic couplet has been one of the most successful means of effecting such 'recitatives' in English. For these reasons – the similarity of the English form to the Persian (which gives the translator at least the chance of reproducing something of the tone and movement of the original) and the necessity of some fairly strict formal scheme if the poem's meaning is not to be betrayed – we have considered that

any drawbacks which may come from eighteenth-century associations are more than outweighed by the advantages. Our method of translation does, however, owe something to the eighteenth century; we have followed, more or less, the guide-lines set out in Alexander Fraser Tytler's admirable *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (first published in 1791), with particular reference to the chapters on verse translation.

No complete translation of the poem has previously been made into English. This translation is of the whole poem with the exception of the invocation and the epilogue. The invocation, a traditional prelude to long narrative poems in Persian, consists of praise of God, of the Prophet and of the founders of Islam. Attar cleverly weaves the introduction of his birds into the list of prophets, and it is at this point that the poem proper starts and our translation opens. The epilogue, again a traditional feature of such poems, consists largely of self-praise and is a distinct anticlimax after a poem devoted to the notion of passing beyond the Self.

Previous translations have been made into English by Edward FitzGerald, Masani and C. S. Nott. Of these, FitzGerald's is the most interesting, though it also takes the most liberties with the text. FitzGerald translates about a fifth of the poem (into heroic couplets); he rearranges the stories, sometimes bowdlerizes them and often translates very freely indeed (as he does in his versions of Khayyam). But, as with the Khayyam poems, he frequently succeeds in capturing much of the tone and feeling of the original. Masani's translation, of around half the poem, is into adequate prose. Nott's prose was prepared from Garcin de Tassy's nineteenth-century French translation; unfortunately the intervention of another language between Nott and the Persian has meant that many of the stories have become blurred in the process. Frequently the point Attar is making is obscured or simply changed; this is especially true in the section where the hoopoe tells anecdotes about sufis who quarrel with God. A fair number of stories are omitted, including the important last story; quite a lot of the commentary is also omitted, and this has rendered the poem's structure very elusive. Attar's tone shifts from the exalted to the sarcastic, from the witty to the indignant; Nott's tone, perhaps because he is translating from an intervening language, is consistently 'reverent', and this makes the poem seem much less lively than it in fact is.

‘This translation has been made from the edition of Attar’s *Manteq at-Tair* prepared by Dr Sadegh Gouharin (Tehran, 1978), and the notes to his edition have been consulted in the preparation of the Biographical Index which follows the poem. Line numbers of the Persian text are given on each page. Other books to which we are particularly indebted, apart from those cited in the introduction, are *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* and A. J. Arberry’s translation of episodes from Attar’s *Tadh-kirat al-Auliya* (London, 1966). We are grateful to the British Institute of Persian Studies for generous financial assistance and to those friends who have read the manuscript through, entirely or in part, and made many valuable suggestions.

lines 616–36

Dear hoopoe, welcome! You will be our guide;
It was on you King Solomon relied
To carry secret messages between
His court and distant Sheba's lovely queen.
He knew your language and you knew his heart –
As his close confidant you learnt the art
Of holding demons captive underground,
And for these valiant exploits you were crowned.
And you are welcome, finch! Rise up and play
Those liquid notes that steal men's hearts away;
Like Moses you have seen the flames burn high
On Sinai's slopes and there you long to fly,
Like him avoid cruel Pharaoh's hand, and seek
Your promised home on Sinai's mountain peak.
There you will understand unspoken words
Too subtle for the ears of mortal birds.
And welcome, parrot, perched in paradise!
Your splendid plumage bears a strange device,
A necklace of bright fire about the throat;
Though heaven's bliss is promised by your coat,
This circle stands for hell; if you can flee
Like Abraham from Nimrod's enmity,
Despise these flames – uninjured you will tread
Through fire if first you cut off Nimrod's head,

And when the fear of him has died put on
Your gorgeous coat; your collar's strength has gone!
Welcome, dear partridge – how you strut with pride
Along the slopes of wisdom's mountain-side;
Let laughter ring out where your feet have trod,
Then strike with all your strength the door of God;
Destroy the mountain of the Self, and here
From ruined rocks a camel will appear;
Beside its new-born noble hooves, a stream
Of honey mingled with white milk will gleam –
Drive on this beast and at your journey's end
Saleh will greet you as a long-lost friend.
Rare falcon, welcome! How long will you be

lines 637–52

So fiercely jealous of your liberty?
Your lure is love, and when the jess is tied,
Submit, and be for ever satisfied.
Give up the intellect for love and see
In one brief moment all eternity;
Break nature's frame, be resolute and brave,
Then rest at peace in Unity's black cave.
Rejoice in that close, undisturbed dark air –
The Prophet will be your companion there.*
And welcome, francolin! Since once you heard
And answered God's first all-commanding word,
Since love has spoken in your soul, reject
The Self, that whirlpool where our lives are wrecked;
As Jesus rode his donkey, ride on it;
Your stubborn Self must bear you and submit –
Then burn this Self and purify your soul;
Let Jesus' spotless spirit be your goal.
Destroy this burden, and before your eyes
The Holy Ghost in glory will arise.
Welcome, dear nightingale – from your sweet throat
Pour out the pain of lovers note by note.
Like David in love's garden gently sigh;
There sing the songs that make men long to die,

O, sing as David did, and with your song
Guide home man's suffering and deluded throng.
The Self is like a mail coat – melt this steel
To pliant wax with David's holy zeal,
And when its metal melts, like David you
Will melt with love and bid the Self adieu.
And welcome, peacock – once of paradise,
Who let the venomous, smooth snake entice
Your instincts to its master's evil way,
And suffered exile for that fateful day;

lines 653–72

He blackened your untutored heart and made
A tangled darkness of the orchard's shade –
Until you crush this snake, how can you be
A pilgrim worthy of our mystery?
Destroy its ugly charm and Adam then
Will welcome you to paradise again.
Cock pheasant, welcome! With your piercing sight,
Look up and see the heart's source drowned in light;
You are imprisoned in your filthy well,
A dark and noisome, unremitting hell –
Rise from this well as Joseph did and gain
The throne of Egypt's fabulous domain,
Where you and Joseph will together reign.
Dear pigeon, welcome – with what joy you yearn
To fly away, how sadly you return!
Your heart is wrung with grief, you share the gaol
That Jonah knew, the belly of a whale –
The Self has swallowed you for its delight;
How long will you endure its mindless spite?
Cut off its head, seek out the moon, and fly
Beyond the utmost limits of the sky;

Escape this monster and become the friend
Of Jonah in that ocean without end.
Welcome, sweet turtle-dove, and softly coo
Until the heavens scatter jewels on you –
But what ingratitude you show! Around
Your neck a ring of loyalty is bound,
But while you live you blithely acquiesce
From head to claw in smug ungratefulness;
Abandon such self-love and you will see
The Way that leads us to Reality.
There knowledge is your guide, and Khezr will bring
Clear water drawn from life's eternal spring.
And welcome, hawk! Your flight is high and proud,
But you return with head politely bowed –
In blood and in affliction you must drown,
And I suggest you keep your head bent down!

lines 673–92

What are you here? Mere carrion, rotten flesh,
Withheld from Truth by this world's clumsy mesh;
Outsoar both this world and the next, and there,
Released from both, take off the hood you wear –
When you have turned from both worlds you will land
On Zulgharnin's outstretched and welcome hand.
And little goldfinch, welcome! May your fire
Be an external sign of fierce desire.
Whatever happens, burn in those bright flames,
And shut your eyes and soul to earthly claims.
Then, as you burn, whatever pain you feel,
Remember God will recompense your zeal;
When you perceive His hidden secrets, give
Your life to God's affairs and truly live –
At last, made perfect in Reality,

You will be gone, and only God will be.

The birds assemble and the hoopoe tells them of the Simorgh

The world's birds gathered for their conference
And said: 'Our constitution makes no sense.
All nations in the world require a king;
How is it we alone have no such thing?
Only a kingdom can be justly run;
We need a king and must inquire for one.'

They argued how to set about their quest.
The hoopoe fluttered forward; on his breast
There shone the symbol of the Spirit's Way
And on his head Truth's crown, a feathered spray.
Discerning, righteous and intelligent,
He spoke: 'My purposes are heaven-sent;
I keep God's secrets, mundane and divine,
In proof of which behold the holy sign

*Bismillah** etched for ever on my beak.

lines 693–716

No one can share the grief with which I seek
Our longed-for Lord, and quickened by my haste
My wits find water in the trackless waste.
I come as Solomon's close friend and claim
The matchless wisdom of that mighty name
(He never asked for those who quit his court,
But when I left him once alone he sought
With anxious vigilance for my return –
Measure my worth by this great king's concern!).
I bore his letters – back again I flew –
Whatever secrets he divined I knew;
A prophet loved me; God has trusted me;
What other bird has won such dignity?
For years I travelled over many lands,
Past oceans, mountains, valleys, desert sands,
And when the Deluge rose I flew around

The world itself and never glimpsed dry ground;
With Solomon I set out to explore
The limits of the earth from shore to shore.
I know our king – but how can I alone
Endure the journey to His distant throne?
Join me, and when at last we end our quest
Our king will greet you as His honoured guest.
How long will you persist in blasphemy?
Escape your self-hood's vicious tyranny –
Whoever can evade the Self transcends
This world and as a lover he ascends.
Set free your soul; impatient of delay,
Step out along our sovereign's royal Way:
We have a king; beyond Kaf's mountain peak
The Simorgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,
And He is always near to us, though we
Live far from His transcendent majesty.
A hundred thousand veils of dark and light
Withdraw His presence from our mortal sight,
And in both worlds no being shares the throne
That marks the Simorgh's power and His alone –

lines 717–37

He reigns in undisturbed omnipotence,
Bathed in the light of His magnificence –
No mind, no intellect can penetrate
The mystery of His unending state:
How many countless hundred thousands pray
For patience and true knowledge of the Way
That leads to Him whom reason cannot claim,
Nor mortal purity describe or name;
There soul and mind bewildered miss the mark
And, faced by Him, like dazzled eyes, are dark –
No sage could understand His perfect grace,
Nor seer discern the beauty of His face.
His creatures strive to find a path to Him,
Deluded by each new, deceitful whim,
But fancy cannot work as she would wish;

You cannot weigh the moon like so much fish!
How many search for Him whose heads are sent
Like polo-balls in some great tournament
From side to giddy side – how many cries,
How many countless groans assail the skies!
Do not imagine that the Way is short;
Vast seas and deserts lie before His court.
Consider carefully before you start;
The journey asks of you a lion's heart.
The road is long, the sea is deep – one flies
First buffeted by joy and then by sighs;
If you desire this quest, give up your soul
And make our sovereign's court your only goal.
First wash your hands of life if you would say:
"I am a pilgrim of our sovereign's Way";
Renounce your soul for love; He you pursue
Will sacrifice His inmost soul for you.

It was in China, late one moonless night,
The Simorgh first appeared to mortal sight –
He let a feather float down through the air,
And rumours of its fame spread everywhere;

lines 738–54

Throughout the world men separately conceived
An image of its shape, and all believed
Their private fantasies uniquely true!
(In China still this feather is on view,
Whence comes the saying you have heard, no doubt,
"Seek knowledge, unto China seek it out.")
If this same feather had not floated down,
The world would not be filled with His renown –
It is a sign of Him, and in each heart
There lies this feather's hidden counterpart.
But since no words suffice, what use are mine
To represent or to describe this sign?
Whoever wishes to explore the Way,

Let him set out – what more is there to say?'

The hoopoe finished, and at once the birds
Effusively responded to his words.
All praised the splendour of their distant king;
All rose impatient to be on the wing;
Each would renounce the Self and be the friend
Of his companions till the journey's end.
But when they pondered on the journey's length,
They hesitated; their ambitious strength
Dissolved: each bird, according to his kind,
Felt flattered but reluctantly declined.

The nightingale's excuse

The nightingale made his excuses first.
His pleading notes described the lover's thirst,
And through the crowd hushed silence spread as he

Descanted on love's scope and mystery.
'The secrets of all love are known to me,'
He crooned. 'Throughout the darkest night my song
Resounds, and to my retinue belong
The sweet notes of the melancholy lute,

lines 755–75

The plaintive wailing of the love-sick flute;
When love speaks in the soul my voice replies
In accents plangent as the ocean's sighs.
The man who hears this song spurns reason's rule;
Grey wisdom is content to be love's fool.
My love is for the rose; I bow to her;

From her dear presence I could never stir.
If she should disappear the nightingale
Would lose his reason and his song would fail,
And though my grief is one that no bird knows,
One being understands my heart – the rose.
I am so drowned in love that I can find
No thought of my existence in my mind.
Her worship is sufficient life for me;
The quest for her is my reality
(And nightingales are not robust or strong;
The path to find the Simorgh is too long).
My love is here; the journey you propose
Cannot beguile me from my life – the rose.
It is for me she flowers; what greater bliss
Could life provide me – anywhere – than this?
Her buds are mine; she blossoms in my sight –
How could I leave her for a single night?'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe answered him: 'Dear nightingale,
This superficial love which makes you quail
Is only for the outward show of things.
Renounce delusion and prepare your wings
For our great quest; sharp thorns defend the rose
And beauty such as hers too quickly goes.
True love will see such empty transience
For what it is – a fleeting turbulence
That fills your sleepless nights with grief and blame –
Forget the rose's blush and blush for shame!

lines 776–97

Each spring she laughs, not *for* you, as you say,
But *at* you – and has faded in a day.

The story of a dervish and a princess

There was a king whose comely daughter's grace
Was such that any man who glimpsed her face
Declared himself in love. Like starless dusk
Her dark hair hung, soft-scented like fine musk;
The charm of her slow, humid eyes awoke
The depths of sleeping love, and when she spoke,
No sugar was as sweet as her lips' sweet;
No rubies with their colour could compete.
A dervish saw her, by the will of Fate.
From his arrested hand the crust he ate
Dropped unregarded, and the princess smiled.
This glance lived in his heart – the man grew wild
With ardent love, with restless misery;
For seven years he wept continually
And was content to live alone and wait,
Abject, among stray dogs, outside her gate.
At last, affronted by this fool and tired
Of his despair, her serving-men conspired
To murder him. The princess heard their plan,
Which she divulged to him. "O wretched man,"
She said, "how could you hope for love between
A dervish and the daughter of a queen?
You cannot live outside my palace door;
Be off with you and haunt these streets no more.
If you are here tomorrow you will die!"
The dervish answered her: "That day when I
First saw your beauty I despaired of life;
Why should I fear the hired assassin's knife?
A hundred thousand men adore your face;
No power on earth could make me leave this place.
But since your servants want to murder me,
Explain the meaning of this mystery:

lines 798–814

'Why did you smile at me that day?" "Poor fool,
I smiled from pity, almost ridicule –
'Your ignorance provoked that smile." She spoke,
And vanished like a wisp of strengthless smoke.'

The parrot's excuse

The pretty parrot was the next to speak,
Clothed all in green, with sugar in her beak,
And round her neck a circle of pure gold.
Even the falcon cannot boast so bold
A loveliness – earth's variegated green
Is but the image of her feathers' sheen,
And when she talks the fascinating sound
Seems sweet as costly sugar finely ground;
She trilled: 'I have been caged by heartless men,
But my desire is to be free again;
If I could reassert my liberty
I'd find the stream of immortality
Guarded by Khezr – his cloak is green like mine,
And this shared colour is an open sign
I am his equal or equivalent.
Only the stream Khezr watches could content
My thirsting soul – I have no wish to seek
This Simorgh's throne of which you love to speak.'

The hoopoe answers her

The hoopoe said: 'You are a cringing slave–
This is not noble, generous or brave,
To think your being has no other end
Than finding water and a loyal friend.
Think well – what is it that you hope to gain?
Your coat is beautiful, but where's your brain?
Act as a lover and renounce your soul;
With love's defiance seek the lover's goal.

lines 815–32

A story about Khezr

Khezr sought companionship with one whose mind
Was set on God alone. The man declined
And said to Khezr: "We two could not be friends,

For our existences have different ends.
The waters of immortal life are yours,
And you must always live; life is your cause
As death is mine – you wish to live, whilst I
Impatiently prepare myself to die;
I leave you as quick birds avoid a snare,
To soar up in the free, untrammelled air".'

The peacock's excuse and the hoopoe's answer

Next came the peacock, splendidly arrayed
In many-coloured pomp; this he displayed
As if he were some proud, self-conscious bride
Turning with haughty looks from side to side.
'The Painter of the world created me,'

He shrieked, 'but this celestial wealth you see
Should not excite your hearts to jealousy.
I was a dweller once in paradise;
There the insinuating snake's advice
Deceived me –I became his friend, disgrace
Was swift and I was banished from that place.
My dearest hope is that some blessed day
A guide will come to indicate the way
Back to my paradise. The king you praise
Is too unknown a goal; my inward gaze
Is fixed for ever on that lovely land –
There is the goal which I can understand.
How could I seek the Simorgh out when I
Remember paradise?' And in reply
The hoopoe said: 'These thoughts have made you stray
Further and further from the proper Way;
You think your monarch's palace of more worth

Than Him who fashioned it and all the earth.
The home we seek is in eternity;
The Truth we seek is like a shoreless sea,
Of which your paradise is but a drop.
This ocean can be yours; why should you stop
Beguiled by dreams of evanescent dew?
The secrets of the sun are yours, but you
Content yourself with motes trapped in its beams.
Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems –
Which matters more, the body or the soul?
Be whole: desire and journey to the Whole.

A story about Adam

A novice asked his master to explain
Why Adam was forbidden to remain
In his first undivided happiness.
The master said: "When he, whose name we bless,
Awoke in paradise a voice declared:
'The man whose mind and vision are ensnared
By heaven's grace must forfeit that same grace,
For only then can he direct his face
To his true Lord'." The lover's life and soul
Are firmly focused on a single goal;
The saints in paradise teach that the start
Of drawing near is to renounce the heart.'

The duck's excuse

The coy duck waddled from her stream and quacked:
'Now none of you can argue with the fact
That both in this world and the next I am
The purest bird that ever flew or swam;
I spread my prayer-mat out, and all the time
I clean myself of every bit of grime
As God commands. There's no doubt in my mind
That purity like mine is hard to find;

Among the birds I'm like an anchorite –
My soul and feathers are a spotless white.
I live in water and I cannot go
To places where no streams or rivers flow;
They wash away a world of discontent –
Why should I leave this perfect element?
Fresh water is my home, my sanctuary;
What use would arid deserts be to me?
I can't leave water – think what water gives;
It is the source of everything that lives.
Water's the only home I've ever known;
Why should I care about this Simorgh's throne?'

The hoopoe answers her

The hoopoe answered her: 'Your life is passed
In vague, aquatic dreams which cannot last –
A sudden wave and they are swept away.
You value water's purity, you say,
But is your life as pure as you declare?
A fool described the nature both worlds share:
"The unseen world and that which we can see
Are like a water-drop which instantly
Is and is not. A water-drop was formed
When time began, and on its surface swarmed
The world's appearances. If they were made
Of all-resisting iron they would fade;
Hard iron is mere water, after all –
Dispersing like a dream, impalpable".'

The partridge's excuse

The pompous partridge was the next to speak,
Fresh from his store of pearls. His crimson beak
And ruddy plumage made a splendid show –
A headstrong bird whose small eyes seemed to glow
With angry blood. He clucked: 'My one desire

Is jewels; I pick through quarries for their fire.
They kindle in my heart an answering blaze
Which satisfies me – though my wretchèd days
Are one long turmoil of anxiety.
Consider how I live, and let me be;
You cannot fight with one who sleeps and feeds
On precious stones, who is convinced he needs
No other goal in life. My heart is tied
By bonds of love to this fair mountain-side.
To yearn for something other than a jewel
Is to desire what dies – to be a fool;
Nothing is precious like a precious stone.
Besides, the journey to the Simorgh's throne
Is hard. I cannot tear myself away;
My feet refuse as if caught fast in clay.
My life is here; I have no wish to fly;
I must discover precious stones or die.'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'You have the colours of
Those jewels you so inordinately love,
And yet you seem – like your excuses – lame.
Your beak and claws are red as blood or flame,
Yet those hard gems from which you cannot part
Have only helped you to a hardened heart;
Without their colours they are nothing more
Than stones – and to the wise not worth a straw.

King Solomon and his ring

No jewel surpasses that which Solomon
Wore on his finger. It was just a stone,
A mere half-dang in weight, but as a seal
Set in his ring it brought the world to heel.
When he perceived the nature of his rule –

lines 904–22

Dependent on the credit of a jewel –
He vowed that no one after him should reign
With such authority.' (Do not again,
Dear God, I pray, create such puissant kings;
My eyes have seen the blight their glory brings.
But criticizing courts is not my task;
A basket-weaver's work is all I ask,
And I return to Solomon's great seal.)
'Although the power it brought the king was real,
Possession of this gem meant that delay
Dogged his advance along the spirit's Way –
The other prophets entered paradise
Five hundred years before the king. This price
A jewel extracted from great Solomon,
How would it hinder such a dizzy one
As you, dear partridge? Rise above this greed;
The Simorgh is the only jewel you need.'

The homa's excuse

The homa* next addressed the company.
Because his shadow heralds majesty,
This wandering portent of the royal state
Is known as Homayun, The Fortunate'.
He sang: 'O birds of land and ocean, I
Am not as other birds, but soar and fly
On lofty aspiration's lordly wings.
I have subdued the dog desire; great kings
Like Feridoun and Jamshid† owe their place
To my dark shadow's influence. Disgrace
And lowly natures are not my concern.
I throw desire its bone; the dog will turn
And let the soul go free. Who can lok down
On one whose shadow brings the royal crown?
line 923–39

The world should bask in my magnificence –

Let Khosroe's glory stand in my defence.
What should this haughty Simorgh mean to me?'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'Poor slave to vanity,
Your self-importance is ridiculous;
Why should a shadow merit so much fuss?
You are not now the sign of Khosroe's throne,
More like a stray dog squabbling for a bone.
Though it is true that you confer on men
This majesty, kings must sink down again
And bear the punishments of Judgement Day.

King Mahmoud after death

There was a man, advanced along the Way,
Who one night spoke to Mahmoud in a dream.
He said: "Great king, how does existence seem
To one beyond the grave?" Mahmoud replied:
"I have no majesty since I have died;
Your greetings pierce my soul. That majesty
Was only ignorance and vanity;
True majesty belongs to God alone –
How could a heap of dust deserve the throne ?
Since I have recognized my impotence,
I blush for my imperial pretence.
Call me 'unfortunate', not 'king'. I should
Have been a wanderer who begged for food,
A crossing-sweeper, any lowly thing
That drags its way through life, but not a king.
Now leave me; I have nothing more to say;
Hell's devils wait for me; I cannot stay.
I wish to God the earth beneath my feet
Had swallowed me before I heard the beat

Of that accursèd homa's wings; they cast
Their shade, and may they shrivel in hell's blast!"'

The hawk's excuse

The hawk came forward with his head held high;
His boasts of grand connections filled the sky.
His talk was stuffed with armies, glory, kings.
He bragged: The ecstasy my sovereign brings
Has turned my gaze from vulgar company.
My eyes are hooded and I cannot see,
But I perch proudly on my sovereign's wrist.
I know court etiquette and can persist
In self-control like holy penitents;
When I approach the king, my deference
Correctly keeps to the established rule.
What is this Simorgh? I should be a fool
If I so much as dreamt of him. A seed
From my great sovereign's hand is all I need;
The eminence I have suffices me.
I cannot travel; I would rather be
Perched on the royal wrist than struggling through
Some arid *wadi* with no end in view.
I am delighted by my life at court,
Waiting on kings or hunting for their sport.'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'Dear hawk, you set great store
By superficial graces, and ignore
The all-important fact of purity.
A king with rivals in his dignity
Is no true king; the Simorgh rules alone
And entertains no rivals to his throne.
A king is not one of those common fools
Who snatches at a crown and thinks he rules.
The true king reigns in mild humility,'

lines 959–76

Unrivalled in his firm fidelity.
An earthly king acts righteously at times,
But also stains the earth with hateful crimes,
And then whoever hovers nearest him
Will suffer most from his destructive whim.
A courtier risks destruction every hour –
Distance yourself from kings and worldly power.
A king is like a raging fire, men say;
The wisest conduct is to keep away.

A king and his slave

There was a monarch once who loved a slave.
The youth's pale beauty haunted him; he gave
This favourite the rarest ornaments,
Watched over him with jealous reverence –
But when the king expressed a wish to shoot,
His loved one shook with fear from head to foot.
An apple balanced on his head would be
The target for the royal archery,
And as the mark was split he blenched with fear.
One day a foolish courtier standing near
Asked why his lovely face was drained and wan,
For was he not their monarch's chosen one?
The slave replied: "If I were hit instead
Of that round apple balanced on my head,
I would be then quite worthless to the king –
Injured or dead, lower than anything
The court can show; but when the arrow hits
The trembling target and the apple splits,
That is his skill. The king is highly skilled
If he succeeds – if not, the slave is killed".'

The heron's excuse

The heron whimpered next: 'My misery
Prefers the empty shoreline of the sea.

There no one hears my desolate, thin cry –

I wait in sorrow there, there mourn and sigh.

'My love is for the ocean, but since I –

A bird – must be excluded from the deep,
I haunt the solitary shore and weep.
My beak is dry – not one drop can I drink –
But if the level of the sea should sink
By one drop, jealous rage woud seize my heart.
This love suffices me; how can I start
A journey like the one that you suggest?
I cannot join you in this arduous quest.
The Simorgh's glory could not comfort me;
My love is fixed entirely on the sea.'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe answered him: 'You do not know
The nature of this sea you love: below
Its surface linger sharks; tempests appear,
Then sudden calms – its course is never clear,
But turbid, varying, in constant stress;
Its water's taste is salty bitterness.
How many noble ships has it destroyed,
Their crews sucked under in the whirlpool's void:
The diver plunges and in fear of death
Must struggle to conserve his scanty breath;
The failure is cast up, a broken straw.
Who trusts the sea? Lawlessness is her law;
You will be drowned if you cannot decide
To turn away from her inconstant tide.
She seethes with love herself – that turbulence
Of tumbling waves, that yearning violence,
Are for her Lord, and since she cannot rest,
What peace could you discover in her breast?

She lives for Him – yet you are satisfied
To hear His invitation and to hide.

lines 998–1014

A hermit questions the ocean

A hermit asked the ocean: “Why are you
Clothed in these mourning robes of darkest blue?*
You seem to boil, and yet I see no fire!”
The ocean said: “My feverish desire
Is for the absent Friend. I am too base
For Him; my dark robes indicate disgrace
And lonely pain. Love makes my billows rage;
Love is the fire which nothing can assuage.
My salt lips thirst for Kausar’s† cleansing stream.”
For those pure waters tens of thousands dream
And are prepared to perish; night and day
They search and fall exhausted by the Way.’

The owl’s excuse

The owl approached with his distracted air,
Hooting: ‘Abandoned ruins are my lair,
Because, wherever mortals congregate,
Strife flourishes and unforgiving hate;
A tranquil mind is only to be found
Away from men, in wild, deserted ground.
These ruins are my melancholy pleasure,
Not least because they harbour buried treasure.
Love for such treasure has directed me
To desolate, waste sites; in secrecy
I hide my hopes that one fine day my foot
Will stumble over unprotected loot.
Love for the Simorgh is a childish story;
My love is solely for gold’s buried glory.’

lines 1015–30

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe answered him: ‘Besotted fool,
Suppose you get this gold for which you drool –
What could you do but guard it night and day
While life itself – unnoticed – slips away?
The love of gold and jewels is blasphemy;
Our faith is wrecked by such idolatry.
To love gold is to be an infidel,
An idol-worshipper who merits hell.
On Judgement Day the miser’s secret greed
Stares from his face for everyone to read.

The miser who became a mouse

A miser died, leaving a cache of gold;
And in a dream what should the son behold
But his dead father, shaped now like a mouse
That dashed distractedly about the house,
His mouse-eyes filled with tears. The sleeping son
Spoke in his dream: “Why, father, must you run
About our home like this?” The poor mouse said:
“Who guards my store of gold now I am dead?
Has any thief found out its hiding-place ?”
The son asked next about his mouse-like face
And heard his father say: “Learn from my state;
Whoever worships gold, this is his fate –
To haunt the hidden cache for evermore,
An anxious mouse that darts across the floor”.’

The finch’s excuse

The timid finch approached. Her feeble frame
Trembled from head to foot, a nervous flame;
She chirped: ‘I am less sturdy than a hair
And lack the courage that my betters share;
My feathers are too weak to carry me
The distance to the Simorgh’s sanctuary.

lines 1031–50

How could a sickly creature stand alone
Before the glory of the Simorgh's throne?
The world is full of those who seek His grace,

But I do not deserve to see His face
And cannot join in this delusive race –
Exhaustion would cut short my foolish days,
Or I should turn to ashes in His gaze.
Joseph was hidden in a well and I
Shall seek my loved one in the wells nearby.'

The hoopoe answers her

The hoopoe said: 'You teasing little bird,
This humble ostentation is absurd!
If all of us are destined for the fire,
Then you too must ascend the burning pyre.
Get ready for the road, you can't fool me –
Sew up your beak, I loathe hypocrisy!
Though Jacob mourned for Joseph's absent face,
Do you imagine you could take his place?

Jacob's dream when Joseph was lost

When Jacob lost his son his eyes grew blind;
Tears flooded for the child he could not find.
His lips repeatedly formed Joseph's name –
To his despair the angel Gabriel came
And said: "Renounce this word; if you persist,
Your own name will be cancelled from the list
Of prophets close to God." Since this command
Came from his God, dear Joseph's name was banned

Henceforth from Jacob's lips; deep in his soul
He hid the passions he could not control.
But as he slept one night the long-lost child
Appeared before him in a dream, and smiled;
He started up to call him to his side –
And then remembered, struck his breast and sighed.

lines 1051–68

When from his vivid dream the old man woke,
The angel Gabriel came to him, and spoke:
"Though you did not pronounce your lost son's name,
You sighed – the exhalation meant the same
As if you had renounced your vow; a sigh
Reveals the heart as clearly as a cry".'

The other birds protest and the hoopoe tells them of their relationship with the Simorgh

The other birds in turn received their chance
To show off their loquacious ignorance.
All made excuses – floods of foolish words
Flowed from these babbling, rumour-loving birds.
Forgive me, reader, if I do not say
All these excuses to avoid the Way;
But in an incoherent rush they came,
And all were inappropriate and lame.
How could they gain the Simorgh? Such a goal
Belongs to those who discipline the soul.
The hoopoe counselled them: 'The world holds few
As worthy of the Simorgh's throne as you,
But you must empty this first glass; the wine
That follows it is love's devoted sign.
If petty problems keep you back – or none –
How will you seek the treasures of the sun?
In drops you lose yourselves, yet you must dive
Through untold fathoms and remain alive.

This is no journey for the indolent –
Our quest is Truth itself, not just its scent!'
When they had understood the hoopoe's words,
A clamour of complaint rose from the birds:
'Although we recognize you as our guide,
You must accept – it cannot be denied –
We are a wretched, flimsy crew at best,
And lack the bare essentials for this quest.

lines 1069–88

Our feathers and our wings, our bodies' strength
Are quite unequal to the journey's length;
For one of us to reach the Simorgh's throne
Would be miraculous, a thing unknown.
At least say what relationship obtains
Between His might and ours; who can take pains
To search for mysteries when he is blind?
If there were some connection we could find,
We would be more prepared to take our chance.
He seems like Solomon, and we like ants;
How can mere ants climb from their darkened pit
Up to the Simorgh's realm? And is it fit
That beggars try the glory of a king?
How ever could they manage such a thing?'
The hoopoe answered them: 'How can love thrive
In hearts impoverished and half alive?
"Beggars", you say – such niggling poverty
Will not encourage truth or charity.
A man whose eyes love opens risks his soul –
His dancing breaks beyond the mind's control.
When long ago the Simorgh first appeared –
His face like sunlight when the clouds have cleared –
He cast unnumbered shadows on the earth,
On each one fixed his eyes, and each gave birth.
Thus we were born; the birds of every land
Are still his shadows – think, and understand.
If you had known this secret you would see
The link between yourselves and Majesty.

Do not reveal this truth, and God forfend
That you mistake for God Himself God's friend.
If you become that substance I propound,
You are not God, though in God you are drowned;
Those lost in Him are'not the Deity –
This problem can be argued endlessly.
You are His shadow, and cannot be moved
By thoughts of life or death once this is proved.

lines 1089–1110

If He had kept His majesty concealed,
No earthly shadow would have been revealed,
And where that shadow was directly cast
The race of birds sprang up before it passed.
Your heart is not a mirror bright and clear
If there the Simorgh's form does not appear;
No one can bear His beauty face to face,
And for this reason, of His perfect grace,
He makes a mirror in our hearts – look there
To see Him, search your hearts with anxious care.

A king who placed mirrors in his palace

There lived a king; his comeliness was such
The world could not acclaim his charm too much.
The world's wealth seemed a portion of his grace;
It was a miracle to view his face.
If he had rivals, then I know of none;
The earth resounded with this paragon.
When riding through his streets he did not fail
To hide his features with a scarlet veil.
Whoever scanned the veil would lose his head;
Whoever spoke his name was left for dead,
The tongue ripped from his mouth; whoever thrilled
With passion for this king was quickly killed.
A thousand for his love expired each day,
And those who saw his face, in blank dismay
Would rave and grieve and mourn their lives away –

To die for love of that bewitching sight
Was worth a hundred lives without his light.
None could survive his absence patiently,
None could endure this king's proximity –
How strange it was that men could neither brook
The presence nor the absence of his look!
Since few could bear his sight, they were content
To hear the king in sober argument,
But while they listened they endured such pain

lines 1111–29

As made them long to see their king again.
The king commanded mirrors to be placed
About the palace walls, and when he faced
Their polished surfaces his image shone
With mitigated splendour to the throng.

If you would glimpse the beauty we revere
Look in your heart – its image will appear.
Make of your heart a looking-glass and see
Reflected there the Friend's nobility;
Your sovereign's glory will illuminate
The palace where he reigns in proper state.
Search for this king within your heart; His soul
Reveals itself in atoms of the Whole.
The multitude of forms that masquerade
Throughout the world spring from the Simorgh's shade.
If you catch sight of His magnificence
It is His shadow that beguiles your glance;
The Simorgh's shadow and Himself are one;
Seek them together, twinned in unison.
But you are lost in vague uncertainty…
Pass beyond shadows to Reality.
How can you reach the Simorgh's splendid court?
First find its gateway, and the sun, long-sought,
Erupts through clouds; when victory is won,
Your sight knows nothing but the blinding sun.

A story about Alexander the Great

When Alexander, that unconquered lord,
Who subjugated empires with his sword,
Required a lengthy message to be sent
He dressed up as the messenger and went.
“The king gives such an order,” he would say,
And none of those who hurried to obey
Once guessed this messenger’s identity –
They had no knowledge of such majesty,

lines 1130–52

And even if he said: “I am your lord”,
The claim was thought preposterous and ignored.
Deluded natures cannot recognize
The royal way that stands before their eyes.

Ayaz’s sickness

Ayaz, afflicted with the Evil Eye,
Fell ill. For safety he was forced to lie
Sequestered from the court, in loneliness.
The king (who loved him) heard of his distress
And called a servant. “Tell Ayaz,” he said,
“What tears of sympathy I daily shed.
Tell him that I endure his suffering,
And hardly comprehend I am the king;
My soul is with him (though my flesh is here)
And guards his bed solicitous with fear;
Ayaz, what could this Evil Eye not do,
If it destroys such loveliness as you!”
The king was silent; then again he spoke:
“Go quickly as a fire, return like smoke;
Stop nowhere, but outrun the brilliant flash
That lights the world before the thunder’s crash.
Go now; if you so much as pause for breath
My anger will pursue you after death.”
The servant scuttled off,

consumed with dread,

And like the wind arrived at
Ayaz' bed –
There sat his sovereign, by the
patient's head!
Aghast, the servant trembled for his life
And pictured in his mind the blood-smeared knife.
"My king," he said, "I swear, I swear indeed,
That I have hurried here with utmost speed –
Although I see you here I cannot see
How in the world you have preceded me;
Believe my innocence, and if I lie
I am a heathen and deserve to die."
His sovereign answered him: "You could not know

lines 1153–71

The hidden ways by which we lovers go;
I cannot bear my life without his face,
And every minute I am in this place.
The passing world outside is unaware
Of mysteries Ayaz and Mahmoud share;
In public I ask after him, although
Behind the veil of secrecy I know
Whatever news my messengers could give;
I hide my secret and in secret live".'

The birds question the hoopoe and he advises them

An ancient secret yielded to the birds
When they had understood the hoopoe's words –
Their kinship with the Simorgh was now plain
And all were eager to set off again.
The homily returned them to the Way
And with one voice the birds were heard to say:

‘Tell us, dear hoopoe, how we should proceed –
Our weakness quails before this glorious deed.’

‘A lover’, said the hoopoe, now their guide,
‘Is one in whom all thoughts of Self have died;
Those who renounce the Self deserve that name;
Righteous or sinful, they are all the same!
Your heart is thwarted by the Self’s control;
Destroy its hold on you and reach your goal.
Give up this hindrance, give up mortal sight,
For only then can you approach the light.
If you are told: “Renounce our Faith”, obey!
The Self and Faith must both be tossed away;
Blasphemers call such action blasphemy –
Tell them that love exceeds mere piety.
Love has no time for blasphemy or faith,
Nor lovers for the Self, that feeble wraith.
They burn all that they own; unmoved they feel
Against their skin the torturer’s sharp steel.

lines 1172–91

Heart’s blood and bitter pain belong to love,
And tales of problems no one can remove;
Cupbearer, fill the bowl with blood, not wine –
And if you lack the heart’s rich blood take mine.
Love thrives on inextinguishable pain,
Which tears the soul, then knits the threads again.
A mote of love exceeds all bounds; it gives
The vital essence to whatever lives.
But where love thrives, there pain is always found;
Angels alone escape this weary round –
They love without that savage agony
Which is reserved for vexed humanity.
Islam and blasphemy have both been passed
By those who set out on love’s path at last;
Love will direct you to Dame Poverty,
And she will show the way to Blasphemy.

When neither Blasphemy nor Faith remain,
The body and the Self have both been slain;
Then the fierce fortitude the Way will ask
Is yours, and you are worthy of our task.
Begin the journey without fear; be calm;
Forget what is and what is not Islam;
Put childish dread aside – like heroes meet
The hundred problems which you must defeat.

The story of Sheikh Sam'an

Sam'an was once the first man of his time.
Whatever praise can be expressed in rhyme
Belonged to him: for fifty years this sheikh
Kept Mecca's holy place, and for his sake
Four hundred pupils entered learning's way.
He mortified his body night and day,
Knew theory, practice, mysteries of great age,
And fifty times had made the Pilgrimage.
He fasted, prayed, observed all sacred laws –
Astonished saints and clerics thronged his doors.

lines 1192–1212

He split religious hairs in argument;
His breath revived the sick and impotent.
He knew the people's hearts in joy and grief
And was their living symbol of Belief.
Though conscious of his credit in their sight,
A strange dream troubled him, night after night;
Mecca was left behind; he lived in Rome,
The temple where he worshipped was his home,
And to an idol he bowed down his head.
"Alas!" he cried, when he awoke in dread,
"Like Joseph I am in a well of need
And have no notion when I shall be freed.
But every man meets problems on the Way,
And I shall conquer if I watch and pray.
If I can shift this rock my path is clear;

If not, then I must wait and suffer here."
Then suddenly he burst out: "It would seem
That Rome could show the meaning of this dream;
There I must go!" And off the old man strode;
Four hundred followed him along the road.
They left the Ka'abah* for Rome's boundaries,
A gentle landscape of low hills and trees,
Where, infinitely lovelier than the view,
There sat a girl, a Christian girl who knew
The secrets of her faith's theology.
A fairer child no man could hope to see –
In beauty's mansion she was like a sun
That never set – indeed the spoils she won
Were headed by the sun himself, whose face
Was pale with jealousy and sour disgrace.
The man about whose heart her ringlets curled
Became a Christian and renounced the world;
The man who saw her lips and knew defeat

lines 1213–34

Embraced the earth before her bonny feet;
And as the breeze passed through her musky hair
The men of Rome watched wondering in despair.
Her eyes spoke promises to those in love,
Their fine brows arched coquettishly above –
Those brows sent glancing messages that seemed
To offer everything her lovers dreamed.
The pupils of her eyes grew wide and smiled,
And countless souls were glad to be beguiled;
The face beneath her curls glowed like soft fire;
Her honeyed lips provoked the world's desire;
But those who thought to feast there found her eyes
Held pointed daggers to protect the prize,
And since she kept her counsel no one knew –
Despite the claims of some – what she would do.
Her mouth was tiny as a needlë's eye,
Her breath as quickening as Jesus' sigh;
Her chin was dimpled with a silver well

In which a thousand drowning Josephs fell;
A glistering jewel secured her hair in place,
Which like a veil obscured her lovely face.
The Christian turned, the dark veil was removed,
A fire flashed through the old man's joints – he loved!
One hair converted hundreds; how could he
Resist that idol's face shown openly?
He did not know himself; in sudden fire
He knelt abjectly as the flames beat higher;
In that sad instant all he had been fled
And passion's smoke obscured his heart and head.
Love sacked his heart; the girl's bewitching hair
Twined round his faith impiety's smooth snare.
The sheikh exchanged religion's wealth for shame,
A hopeless heart submitted to love's fame.
"I have no faith," he cried. "The heart I gave
Is useless now; I am the Christian's slave."
When his disciples saw him weeping there
And understood the truth of the affair,

lines 1235–58

They stared, confounded by his frantic grief,
And strove to call him back to his belief.
Their remonstrations fell on deafened ears;
Advice has no effect when no one hears.
In turn the sheikh's disciples had their say;
Love has no cure, and he could not obey.
(When did a lover listen to advice?
When did a nostrum cool love's flames to ice?)
Till evening came he could not move but gazed
With stupefaction in his face, amazed.

When gloomy twilight spread its darkening shrouds –
Like blasphemy concealed by guilty clouds –
His ardent heart gave out the only light,
And love increased a hundredfold that night.
He put aside the Self and selfish lust;

In grief he smeared his locks with filth and dust
And kept his haunted vigil, watched and wept,
Lay trembling in love's grip and never slept.
"O Lord, when will this darkness end?" he cried,
"Or is it that the heavenly sun has died?
Those nights I passed in faith's austerities
Cannot compare with this night's agonies;
But like a candle now my flame burns high
To weep all night and in the daylight die.
Ambush and blood have been my lot this night;
Who knows what torments day will bring to light?
This fevered darkness and my wretched state
Were made when I was made, and are my fate;
The night continues and the hours delay –
Perhaps the world has reached its Judgement Day;
Perhaps the sun's extinguished with my sighs,
Or hides in shame from my beloved's eyes.
This long, dark night is like her flowing hair –
The thought in absence comforts my despair,
But love consumes me through this endless night –
I yield to love, unequal to the fight.

lines 1259–79

Where is there time enough to tell my grief?
Where is the patience to regain belief?
Where is the luck to waken me, or move
Love's idol to reciprocate my love?
Where is the reason that could rescue me,
Or by some trick prove my auxiliary?
Where is the hand to pour dust on my head,
Or lift me from the dust where I lie dead?
Where is the foot that seeks the longed-for place?
Where is the eye to show me her fair face?
Where is the loved one to relieve my pain?
Where is the guide to help me turn again?
Where is the strength to utter my complaint?
Where is the mind to counsel calm restraint?
The loved one, reason, patience – all are gone

And I remain to suffer love alone."

At this the fond disciples gathered round,
Bewildered by his groans' pathetic sound.
"My sheikh," urged one, "forget this evil sight;
Rise, cleanse yourself according to our rite."
"In blood I cleanse myself," the sheikh replied;
"In blood, a hundred times, my life is dyed."
Another asked: "Where is your rosary?"
He said: "I fling the beads away from me;
The Christian's belt* is my sole sanctuary!"
One urged him to repent; he said: "I do,
Of all I was, all that belonged thereto."
One counselled prayer; he said: "Where is her face
That I may pray toward that blessèd place?"
Another cried: "Enough of this; you must
Seek solitude and in repentant dust
Bow down to God." "I will", replied the sheikh,
"Bow down in dust, but for my idol's sake."
And one reproached him: "Have you no regret

lines 1280–1302

For Islam and those rites you would forget?"
He said: "No man repents past folly more;
Why is it I was not in love before?"
Another said: "A demon's poisoned dart –
Unknown to you – has pierced your trusting heart."
The sheikh said: "If a demon straight from hell
Deceives me, I rejoice and wish her well."
One said: "Our noble sheikh has lost his way;
Passion has led his wandering wits astray."
"True, I have lost the fame I once held dear,"
Replied their sheikh, "and fraud as well, and fear."
One said: "You break our hearts with this disgrace."
He laughed: "The Christian's heart will take their place."
One said: "Stay with old friends awhile, and come –
We'll seek the Ka'abah's shade and journey home."

The sheikh replied: “A Christian monastery
And not the Ka’abah’s shade suffices me.”
One said: “Return to Mecca and repent!”
He answered: “Leave me here, I am content.”
One said: “You travel on hell’s road.” “This sigh
Would shrivel seven hells” was his reply.
One said: “In hope of heaven turn again.”
He said: “Her face is heaven; I remain.”
One said: “Before our God confess your shame.”
He answered: “God Himself has lit this flame.”
One said: “Stop vacillating now and fight;
Defend the ways our faith proclaims as right.”
He said: “Prepare your ears for blasphemy;
An infidel does not prate piety.”
Their words could not recall him to belief,
And slowly they grew silent, sunk in grief.
They watched; each felt the heart within him fail,
Fearful of deeds Fate hid beneath her veil.

At last white day displayed her golden shield;
Black night declined his head, compelled to yield –
The world lay drowned in sparkling light, and dawn

lines 1303–25

Disclosed the sheikh, still wretched and forlorn,
Disputing with stray dogs the place before
His unattainable belovèd’s door.
There in the dust he knelt, till constant prayers
Made him resemble one of her dark hairs;
A patient month he waited day and night
To glimpse the radiance of her beauty’s light.
At last fatigue and sorrow made him ill –
Her street became his bed and he lay still.
When she perceived he would – and could – not move,
She understood the fury of his love,
But she pretended ignorance
and said:

"What is it, sheikh? Why is our street your bed?
How can a Moslem sleep where Christians tread?"
He answered her: "I have no need to speak;
You know why I am wasted, pale and weak.
Restore the heart you stole, or let me see
Some glimmer in your heart of sympathy;
In all your pride find some affection for
The grey-haired, lovesick stranger at your door.
Accept my love or kill me now – your breath
Revives me or consigns me here to death.
Your face and curls command my life; beware
Of how the breeze displays your vagrant hair;
The sight breeds fever in me, and your deep
Hypnotic eyes induce love's restless sleep.
Love mists my eyes, love burns my heart – alone,

Impatient and unloved, I weep and groan;
See what a sack of sorrow I have sewn!
I give my soul and all the world to burn,
And endless tears are all I hope to earn.
My eyes beheld your face, my heart despaired;
What I have seen and suffered none have shared.
My heart has turned to blood; how long must I
Subsist on misery? You need not try
To humble wretchedness, or kick the foe
Who in the dust submissively bows low.

lines 1326–45

It is my fortune to lament and wait –
When, if, love answers me depends on Fate.
My soul is ambushed here, and in your street
Relives each night the anguish of defeat;
Your threshold's dust receives my prayers –I give
As cheap as dust the soul by which I live.
How long outside your door must I complain?
Relent a moment and relieve my pain.
You are the sun and I a shadow thrown
By you – how then can I survive alone?
Though pain has worn me to a shadow's edge,
Like sunlight I shall leap your window's ledge;
Let me come in and I shall secretly
Bring seven heavens' happiness with me.
My soul is burnt to ash; my passion's fire
Destroys the world with unappeased desire.
Love binds my feet and I cannot depart;
Love holds the hand pressed hard against my heart.
My fainting soul dissolves in deathly sighs –
How long must you stay hidden from my eyes?"

She laughed: "You shameless fool, take my advice –
Prepare yourself for death and paradise!
Forget flirtatious games, your breath is cold;
Stop chasing love, remember you are old.
It is a shroud you need, not me! How could
You hope for wealth when you must beg for food?"
He answered her: "Say what you will, but I
In love's unhappy torments live and die;
To Love, both young and old are one – his dart
Strikes with unequalled strength in every heart."
The girl replied: "There are four things you must
Perform to show that you deserve my trust:
Burn the Koran, drink wine, seel up Faith's eye,
Bow down to images." And in reply
The sheikh declared: "Wine I will drink with you;
The rest are things that I could never do."

lines 1346–70

She said: “If you agree to my commands,
To start with, you must wholly wash your hands
Of Islam’s faith – the love which does not care
To bend to love’s requests is empty air.”
He yielded then: “I must and will obey;
I’ll do whatever you are pleased to say.
Your slave submits – lead me with ringlets twined
As chains about my neck; I am resigned!”
She smiled: “Come then and drink”, and he allowed
Her to escort him to a hall (the crowd
Of scholars followed, weeping and afraid)
Where Christians banqueted, and there a maid
Of matchless beauty passed the cup around.
Love humbled our poor sheikh – without a sound
He gave his heart into the Christian’s hands;
His mind had fled, he bowed to her commands,
And from those hands he took the proffered bowl;
He drank, oblivion overwhelmed his soul.
Wine mingled with his love – her laughter seemed
To challenge him to take the bliss he dreamed.
Passion flared up in him; again he drank,
And slave-like at her feet contented sank –
This sheikh who had the whole Koran by heart
Felt wine spread through him and his faith depart;
Whatever he had known deserted him,
Wine conquered and his intellect grew dim;
Wine sluiced away his conscience; she alone
Lived in his heart, all other thoughts had flown.
Now love grew violent as an angry sea,
He watched her drink and moved instinctively –
Half-fuddled with the wine – to touch her neck.
But she drew back and held his hand in check,
Deriding him: “What do you want, old man?
Old hypocrite of love, who talks but can
Do nothing else? To prove your love, declare
That your religion is my rippling hair.
Love’s more than childish games, if you agree –

For love – to imitate my blasphemy
You can embrace me here; if not, you may
Take up your stick and hobble on your way."
The abject sheikh had sunk to such a state
That he could not resist his wretched fate;
Now ignorant of shame and unafraid,
He heard the Christian's wishes and obeyed –
The old wine sidled through the old man's veins
And like a twisting compass turned his brains;
Old wine, young love, a lover far too old,
Her soft arms welcoming – could he be cold?
Beside himself with love and drink he cried:
"Command me now; whatever you decide
I will perform. I spurned idolatry
When sober, but your beauty is to me
An idol for whose sake I'll gladly burn
My faith's Koran." "Now you begin to learn,
Now you are mine, dear sheikh," she said. "Sleep well,
Sweet dreams; our ripening fruit begins to swell."

News spread among the Christians that this sheikh
Had chosen their religion for love's sake.
They took him to a nearby monastery,
Where he accepted their theology;
He burnt his dervish cloak and set his face
Against the faith and Mecca's holy place –
After so many years of true belief,
A young girl brought this learned sheikh to grief.
He said: "This dervish has been well betrayed;
The agent was mere passion for a maid.
I must obey her now – what I have done
Is worse than any crime beneath the sun."
(How many leave the faith through wine! It is
The mother of such evil vagaries.)
"Whatever you required is done," he said.
"What more remains? I have bowed down my head
In love's idolatry, I have drunk wine;

May no one pass through wretchedness like mine!
Love ruins one like me, and black disgrace
Now stares a once-loved dervish in the face.
For fifty years I walked an open road
While in my heart high seas of worship flowed;
Love ambushed me and at its sudden stroke
For Christian garments I gave up my cloak;
The Ka'abah has become love's secret sign,
And homeless love interprets the Divine.
Consider what, for your sake, I have done –
Then tell me, when shall we two be as one?
Hope for that moment justifies my pain;
Have all my troubles been endured in vain?"
The girl replied: "But you are poor, and I
Cannot be cheaply won – the price is high;
Bring gold, and silver too, you innocent –
Then I might pity your predicament;
But you have neither, therefore go – and take
A beggar's alms from me; be off, old sheikh!
Be on your travels like the sun – alone;
Be manly now and patient, do not groan!"
"A fine interpretation of your vow,"
The sheikh replied; "my love, look at me now –
I have no one but you; your cypress gait,
Your silver form, decide my wretched fate.
Take back your cruel commands; each moment you
Confuse me by demanding something new.
I have endured your absence, promptly done
All you have asked – what profit have I won?
I've passed beyond loss, profit, Islam, crime,
For how much longer must I bide my time?
Is this what we agreed? My friends have gone,
Despising me, and I am here alone.
They follow one way, you another – I
Stand witless here uncertain where to fly;
I know without you heaven would be hell,
Hell heaven with you; more I cannot tell."

lines 1417–38

At last his protestations moved her heart.
“You are too poor to play the bridegroom’s part,”
She said, “but be my swineherd for a year
And then we’ll stay together, never fear.”
The sheikh did not refuse – a fractious way
Estranges love; he hurried to obey.
This reverend sheikh kept swine – but who does not
Keep something swinish in his nature’s plot?
Do not imagine only he could fall;
This hidden danger lurks within us all,
Rearing its bestial head when we begin
To tread salvation’s path – if you think sin
Has no place in your nature, you can stay
Content at home; you are excused the Way.
But if you start our journey you will find
That countless swine and idols tease the mind –
Destroy these hindrances to love or you
Must suffer that disgrace the sad sheikh knew.

Despair unmanned his friends; they saw his plight
And turned in helpless horror from the sight –
The dust of grief anointed each bowed head;
But one approached the hapless man and said:
“We leave for Mecca now, O weak-willed sheikh;
Is there some message you would have us take?
Or should we all turn Christians and embrace
This faith men call a blasphemous disgrace?
We get no pleasure from the thought of you
Left here alone – shall we be Christians too?
Or since we cannot bear your state should we,
Deserting you, incontinently flee;
Forget that you exist and live in prayer
Beside the Ka’abah’s stone without a care?”
The sheikh replied: “What grief has filled my heart!
Go where you please – but quickly, now, depart;
Only the Christian keeps my soul alive,
And I shall stay with her while I survive.

lines 1439–64

Though you are wise your wisdom cannot know
The wild frustrations through which lovers go.
If for one moment you could share my pain,
We could be old companions once again.
But now go back, dear friends; if anyone
Asks after me explain what I have done –
Say that my eyes swim blood, that parched I wait
Trapped in the gullet of a monstrous fate.
Say Islam's elder has outsinned the whole
Of heathen blasphemy, that self-control
Slipped from him when he saw the Christian's hair,
That faith was conquered by insane despair.
Should anyone reproach my actions, say
That countless others have pursued this Way,
This endless Way where no one is secure,
Where danger waits and issues are unsure."
He turned from them; a swineherd sought his swine.
His friends wept vehemently – their sheikh's decline
Seemed death to them. Sadly they journeyed home,
Resigning their apostate sheikh to Rome.

They skulked in corners, shameful and afraid.
A close companion of the sheikh had stayed
In Mecca while the group had journeyed west –
A man of wisdom, fit for any test,
Who, seeing now the vacant oratory
Where once his friend had worshipped faithfully,
Asked after their lost sheikh. In tears then they
Described what had occurred along the way;
How he had bound his fortunes to her hair,
And blocked the path of faith with love's despair;
How curls usurped belief and how his cloak
Had been consumed in passion's blackening smoke;
How he'd become a swineherd, how the four
Acts contrary to all Islamic law
Had been performed by him, how this great sheikh
Lived like a pagan for his lover's sake.

lines 1465–86

Amazement seized the friend – his face grew pale,
He wept and felt the heart within him fail.
“O criminals!” he cried. “O frailer than
Weak women in your faith – when does a man
Need faithful friends but in adversity?
You should be there, not prattling here to me.
Is this devoted love? Shame on you all,
Fair-weather friends who run when great men fall.
He put on Christian garments – so should you;
He took their faith – what else had you to do?
This was no friendship, to forsake your friend,
To promise your support and at the end
Abandon him – this was sheer treachery.
Friend follows friend to hell and blasphemy –
When sorrows come a man’s true friends are found;
In times of joy ten thousand gather round.
Our sheikh is savaged by some shark – you race
To separate yourselves from his disgrace.
Love’s built on readiness to share love’s shame;
Such self-regarding love usurps love’s name.”
“Repeatedly we told him all you say,”
They cried. “We were companions of the Way,
Sworn to a common happiness or grief;
We should exchange the honours of belief
For odium and scorn; we should accept
The Christian cult our sheikh could not reject.
But he insisted that we leave – our love
Seemed pointless then; he ordered us to move.
At his express command we journeyed here
To tell his story plainly, without fear.”

He answered them: “However hard the fight,
You should have fought for what was clearly right.
Truth struggled there with error; when you went
You only worsened his predicament.
You have abandoned him; how could you dare

To enter Mecca's uncorrupted air?"
They heard his speech; not one would raise his head.
And then, "There is no point in shame," he said.
"What's done is done; we must act justly now,
Bury this sin, seek out the sheikh and bow
Before him once again." They left their home
And made their way a second time to Rome;
They prayed a hundred thousand prayers – at times
With hope, at times disheartened by their crimes.
They neither ate nor slept but kept their gaze
Unswerving throughout forty nights and days.
Their wailing lamentations filled the sky,
Moving the green-robed angels ranked on high
To clothe themselves with black, and in the end
The leader of the group, the sheikh's true friend,
His heart consumed by sympathetic grief,
Let loose the well-aimed arrows of belief.
For forty nights he had prayed privately,
Rapt in devotion's holy ecstasy –
At dawn there came a musk-diffusing breeze,
And in his heart he knew all mysteries.
He saw the Prophet, lovely as the moon,
Whose face, Truth's shadow, was the sun at noon,
Whose hair in two black heavy braids was curled –
Each hair, a hundred times, outpriced the world.
As he approached with his unruffled pace,
A smile of haunting beauty lit his face.
The sheikh's friend rose and said: "God's Messenger,
Vouchsafe your help. Our sheikh has wandered far;
You are our Guide; guide him to Truth again."
The Prophet answered: "I have loosed the chain
Which bound your sheikh – your prayer is answered, go.
Thick clouds of dust have been allowed to blow
Between his sight and Truth – those clouds have gone;
I did not leave him to endure alone.
I sprinkled on the fortunes of your sheikh
A cleansing dew for intercession's sake –

The dust is laid; sin disappeared before

His new-made vow. A world of sin, be sure,
Shall with contrition's spittle be made pure.
The sea of righteousness drowns in its waves
The sins of those sincere repentance saves."

With grateful happiness the friend cried out;
The heavens echoed his triumphant shout.
He told the good news to the group; again
They set out eagerly across the plain.
Weeping they ran to where the swineherd-sheikh,
Now cured of his unnatural mistake,
Had cast aside his Christian clothes, the bell,
The belt, the cap, freed from the strange faith's spell.
Seeing his friends approach his hiding-place,
He saw how he had forfeited God's grace;
He ripped his clothes in frenzies of distress;
He grovelled in the dust with wretchedness.
Tears flowed like rain; he longed for death; his sighs'
Great heat consumed the curtain of the skies;
Grief dried the blood within him when he saw
How he had lost all knowledge of God's law;
All he had once abandoned now returned
And he escaped the hell in which he'd burned.
He came back to himself, and on his knees
Wept bitterly for past iniquities.
When his disciples saw him weeping there,
Bathed in shame's sweat, they reeled between despair
And joy – bewildered they drew near and sighed;
From gratitude they gladly would have died.
They said: "The mist has fled that hid your sun;
Faith has returned and blasphemy is gone;
Truth has defeated Rome's idolatry;

Grace has surged onward like a mighty sea.
The Prophet interceded for your soul;
The world sends up its thanks from pole to pole.
Why should you mourn? You should thank God instead

lines 1534–53

That out of darkness you've been safely led;
God who can turn the day to darkest night
Can turn black sin to pure repentant light –
He kindles a repentant spark, the flame
Burns all our sins and all sin's burning shame."

I will be brief: the sheikh was purified
According to the faith; his old self died –
He put the dervish cloak on as before.
The group set out for Mecca's gates once more.

And then the Christian girl whom he had loved
Dreamed in her sleep; a shaft of sunlight moved
Before her eyes, and from the dazzling ray
A voice said: ''Rise, follow your lost sheikh's way;
Accept his faith, beneath his feet be dust;
You tricked him once, be pure to him and just,
And, as he took your path without pretence,
Take his path now in truth and innocence.
Follow his lead; you once led him astray –
Be his companion as he points the Way;
You were a robber preying on the road
Where you should seek to share the traveller's load.
Wake now, emerge from superstition's night."
She woke, and in her heart a steady light
Beat like the sun, and an unwonted pain
Throbbed there, a longing she could not restrain;
Desire flared up in her; she felt her soul
Slip gently from the intellect's control.
As yet she did not know what seed was sown –

She had no friend and found herself alone
In an uncharted world; no tongue can tell
What then she saw – her pride and triumph fell
Like rain from her; with an unearthly shout
She tore the garments from her back, ran out
And heaped the dust of mourning on her head.
Her frame was weak, the heart within her bled,
But she began the journey to her sheikh,

lines 1554–76

And like a cloud that seems about to break
And shed its downpour of torrential rain
(The heart's rich blood) she ran across the plain.
But soon the desert's endless vacancy
Bewildered her; wild with uncertainty,
She wept and pressed her face against the sand.
"O God," she cried, "extend your saving hand
To one who is an outcast of the earth,
To one who tricked a saint of unmatched worth –
Do not abandon me; my evil crime
Was perpetrated in a thoughtless time;
I did not know what I know now – accept
The prayers of one who ignorantly slept."

The sheikh's heart spoke: "The Christian is no more;
The girl you loved knocks at religion's door –
It is our way she follows now; go back
And be the comforter her sorrows lack."
Like wind he ran, and his disciples cried:
"Has your repentant vow so quickly died?
Will you slip back, a shameless reprobate?"
But when the sheikh explained the girl's sad state,
Compassion moved their hearts and they agreed
To search for her and serve her every need.
They found her with hair draggled in the dirt,
Prone on the earth as if a corpse, her skirt
Torn from her limbs, barefoot, her face death-pale.

She saw the sheikh and felt her last strength fail;
She fainted at his feet, and as she slept
The sheikh hung over her dear face and wept.

She woke, and seeing tears like rain in spring
Knew he'd kept faith with her through everything.
She knelt before him, took his hands and said
"The shame I brought on your respected head
Burns me with shame; how long must I remain
Behind this veil of ignorance? Make plain

lines 1577–95

The mysteries of Islam to me here,
And I shall tread its highway without fear."
The sheikh spelt out the faith to her; the crowd
Of gratified disciples cried aloud,
Weeping to see the lovely child embrace
The search for Truth. Then, as her comely face
Bent to his words, her heart began to feel
An inexpressible and troubling zeal;
Slowly she felt the pall of grief descend,
Knowing herself still absent from the Friend.
"Dear sheikh," she said, "I cannot bear such pain;
Absence undoes me and my spirits wane.
I go from this unhappy world; farewell
World's sheikh and mine – further I cannot tell,
Exhaustion weakens me; O sheikh, forgive…"
And saying this the dear child ceased to live.
The sun was hidden by a mist – her flesh
Yielded the sweet soul from its weakening mesh.
She was a drop returned to Truth's great sea;
She left this world, and so, like wind, must we.

Whoever knows love's path is soon aware
That stories such as this are far from rare.
All things are possible, and you may meet

Despair, forgiveness, certainty, deceit.
The Self ignores the secrets of the Way,
The mysteries no mortal speech can say;
Assurance whispers in the heart's dark core,
Not in the muddied Self – a bitter war
Must rage between these two. Turn now and mourn
That your existence is so deeply torn!'

The birds set off on their journey, pause, then choose a leader

They heard the tale; the birds were all on fire
To quit the hindrance of the Self; desire
To gain the Simorgh had convulsed each heart;

lines 1596–1614

Love made them clamour for the journey's start.
They set out on the Way, a noble deed!

Hardly had they begun when they agreed
To call a halt: 'A leader's what we need,'
They said, 'one who can bind and loose, one who
Will guide our self-conceit to what is true;
We need a judge of rare ability
To lead us over danger's spacious sea;
Whatever he commands along the Way,
We must, without recalcitrance, obey,
Until we leave this plain of sin and pride
And gain Kaf's distant peak. There we shall hide,
A mote lost in the sun; the Simorgh's shade
Will cover those who travelled and obeyed.
But which of us is worthy of this trust?

A lottery is suitable and just.
The winning lot must finally decide
Which bird should be our undisputed guide.'
A hush fell, arguments were laid aside,
The lots were chosen, and the hoopoe won,
A lucky verdict that pleased everyone.
He was their leader; they would sacrifice
Their lives if he demanded such a price;
And as they travelled on the Way his word
Would spell authority to every bird.

The birds are frightened by the emptiness of the Way, and the hoopoe tells them a story about Sheikh Bayazid

The hoopoe, as their chief, was hailed and crowned –
Huge flocks of birds in homage gathered round;
A hundred thousand birds assembled there,
Making a monstrous shadow in the air.
The throng set out – but, clearing the first dune,
Their leader sent a cry up to the moon
And panic spread among the birds; they feared
The endless desolation which appeared.

lines 1615–31

They clung together in a huddling crowd,
Drew in their heads and wings and wailed aloud
A melancholy, weak, faint-hearted song –
Their burdens were too great, the way too long!
How featureless the view before their eyes,
An emptiness where they could recognize
No marks of good or ill – a silence where
The soul knew neither hope nor blank despair.

One said, The Way is lifeless, empty-why?'
To which the hoopoe gave this strange reply:
To glorify the king.

One moonlit night
Sheikh Bayazid, attracted by the sight
Of such refulgent brilliance, clear as day,
Across the sleeping city took his way
And thence into the desert, where he saw
Unnumbered stars adorning heaven's floor.
He walked a little and became aware
That not a sound disturbed the desert air,
That no one moved in that immensity
Save him. His heart grew numb and gradually
Pure terror touched him. "O great God," he cried,
"Your dazzling palace beckons far and wide –
Where are the courtiers who should throng this court?"
A voice said: "Wanderer, you are distraught;
Be calm. Our glorious King cannot admit
All comers to His court; it is not fit
That every rascal who sleeps out the night
Should be allowed to glimpse its radiant light.
Most are turned back, and few perceive the throne;
Among a hundred thousand there is one".'

The birds ask the hoopoe to resolve their doubts

The trembling birds stared out across the plain;
The road seemed endless as their endless pain.

lines 1632–56

But in the hoopoe's heart new confidence
Transported him above the firmaments –
The sands could not alarm him nor the high
Harsh sun at noon, the peacock of the sky.
What other bird, throughout the world, could bear
The troubles of the Way and all its care?

The frightened flock drew nearer to their guide.
‘You know the perils of the Way,’ they cried,
‘And how we should behave before the king –
You served great Solomon in everything
And flew across his lands – therefore you know
Exactly where it’s safe and right to go;
You’ve seen the ups and downs of this strange Way.
It is our wish that as our guide you say
How we should act before the king we seek;
And more, as we are ignorant and weak,
That you should solve the problems in our hearts
Before the fearful company departs.
First hear our doubts; the thing we do not doubt
Is that you’ll answer them and drive them out –
We know that on this lengthy Way no light
Will come to clear uncertainty’s dark night;
But when the heart is free we shall commit
Our hearts and bodies, all we have, to it.’

The hoopoe stood to speak, and all the birds
Approached to be encouraged by his words;
A hundred thousand gathered with one mind,
Serried in ranks according to their kind.
The dove and nightingale voiced their complaint;
Such beauty made the company grow faint –
A cry of ecstasy went up; a state
Where neither Self nor void predominate
Fell on the birds. The hoopoe spoke; he drew
The veil from what is ultimately true.

lines 1657–73

One asked: ‘How is it you surpass us in
This search for Truth; what is our crippling sin?
We search and so do you – but you receive
Truth’s purity while we stand by and grieve.’

The hoopoe tells them about the glance of Solomon

The hoopoe answered him: 'Great Solomon
Once looked at me – it is that glance alone
Which gave me what I know; no wealth could bring
The substance I received from wisdom's king.
No one can gain this by the forms of prayer,
For even Satan bowed with pious care;
Though don't imagine that you need not pray;
We curse the fool who tricks you in this way.
Pray always, never for one moment cease,
Pray in despair and when your goods increase,
Consume your life with prayer, till Solomon
Bestows his glance, and ignorance is gone.
When Solomon accepts you, you will know
Far more than my unequal words can show.'

The story of King Mas'oud and the fisherboy

He said: 'King Mas'oud, riding out one day,
Was parted from his army on the way.
Swift as the wind he galloped till he saw
A little boy sat by the ocean's shore.
The child was fishing – as he cast his hook,
The king dismounted with a friendly look
And sat by him; but the unhappy child
Was troubled in his heart and hardly smiled.
"You seem the saddest boy I've ever seen,"
The monarch said. "What can such sorrow mean?"
"Our father's gone; for seven children I
Must cast my line" was his subdued reply.
"Our mother's paralysed and we are poor;

It is for food that I must haunt this shore –
I come to fish here in the dawn's first light
And cannot leave until the fall of night.
The meagre harvest of my toil and pain
Must last us all till I return again."
The king said: "Let's be
friends, do you agree?"

The poor child nodded and, immediately,
His new friend cast their line into the sea.
That day the boy drew up a hundred fish.
"This wealth is far beyond my wildest wish,
"He said. "A splendid haul," the king replied.
"Good Fortune has been busy at your side –
Accept your luck, don't try to comprehend
How this has happened; you'd be lost, my friend.
Your wealth is greater than my own; today
A king has fished for you – I cannot stay."
He leapt onto his horse. "But take your share,"
The boy said earnestly. "That's only fair."
"Tomorrow's catch is mine. We won't divide
Today's; you have it all," the king replied.
"Tomorrow when I fish you are the prey,
A trophy I refuse to give away."
The next day, walking in his garden's shade,
The king recalled the friend that he had made.
A captain fetched the boy, and this unknown
Was at the king's command set on his throne.
The courtiers murmured at his poverty –
"He is my friend, this fact suffices me;
He is my equal here in everything,
The partner of my throne," declared the king;
To every taunt the boy had one reply:
"My sadness vanished when the king passed by."

A murderer who went to heaven

A murderer, according to the law,
Was killed. That night the king who'd killed him saw

lines 1693–1710

The same man in a dream; to his surprise
The villain lorded it in paradise –
The king cried: “You! In this celestial place!
Your life’s work was an absolute disgrace;
How did you reach this state?” The man replied:
“A friend to God passed by me as I died;
The earth drank up my blood, but stealthily
That pilgrim on Truth’s journey glanced at me,
And all the glorious extravagance
That laps me now came from his searing glance.”

The man on whom that quickening glance alights
Is raised to heaven’s unsuspected heights;
Indeed, until this glance discovers you
Your life’s a mystery without a clue;
You cannot carve your way to heaven’s throne
If you sit locked in vanity alone.
You need a skilful guide; you cannot start
This ocean-voyage with blindness in your heart.
It may be you will meet the very guide
Who glanced at me; be sure he will provide –
Whatever troubles come – a place to hide.
You cannot guess what dangers you will find,
You need a staff to guide you, like the blind.
Your sight is failing and the road is long;
Trust one who knows the journey and is strong.
Whoever travels in a great lord’s shade
Need never hesitate or be afraid;
Whoever undertakes this lord’s commands
Finds thorns will change to roses in his hands.

The story of King Mahmoud and the woodcutter

King Mahmoud went out hunting. In the chase
His courtiers flagged, unequal to the pace.
An old man led a donkey whose high load
Of brushwood slipped and fell into the road.

lines 1711–31

The old man scratched his head; the king came near
And said: “Do you need help?” “I do, that’s clear,”
The old man said; “if you could lend a hand,
You won’t lose much. I see that you command
Your share of grace – such men are always good.”
The king got down and helped him with the wood,
His flower-like hands embraced the thorns; and then
He rode back to his waiting lords again.
He said to them: “An old man will appear,
Riding a piled-high donkey – lead him here;
Block all the paths and highways to this place;
I want him to confront me face to face.”
The winding roads were blocked up in a ring,
Of which the centre was the waiting king.
The old man mumbled as he rode alone:
“Why won’t he go… this donkey’s skin and bone.
Soldiers!… Good day, my lords!” and still the way
Led pitilessly on; to his dismay
There rose ahead a royal canopy,
And there was no escape that he could see.
He rode, for there was nothing else to do,
And found awaiting him a face he knew.
“I made a king hump wood for me,” he cried;
“God help all sinners now, I’m terrified.”
“What troubles you, my man?” inquired the king.
“Don’t play with me, you took in everything,”
The old man said; “I’m just a wretched fool
Who day and night must scour the plain for fuel;
I sell the thorns I get and buy dry bread –
Give me some scraps, and blessings on your head.”
The king replied: “Old man, I’ll buy your wood –

Come, name a price you think is fair and good.”
“My lord, such wood cannot be cheaply sold;
It’s worth, I reckon, ten full bags of gold.”
The courtiers laughed: “It’s worth two barley grains.
Shut up and sell, and thank you for your pains.”
“Two grains, my friends, that’s true – but this rare buyer

lines 1732–47

Can surely manage something rather higher?
A great one touched these thorns – his hand brought forth
A hundred flowers; just think what that is worth!
A dinar buys one root – a little gain
Is only right, I’ve had my share of pain;
The wood itself is worthless, I agree –
It is that touch which gives it dignity” ‘

A cowardly bird protests

One of the birds let out a helpless squeak:
‘I can’t go on this journey, I’m too weak.
Dear guide, I know I can’t fly any more;
I’ve never tried a feat like this before.
This valley’s endless; dangers lie ahead;
The first time that we rest I’ll drop down dead.
Volcanoes loom before the goal is won –
Admit this journey’s not for everyone.
The blood of multitudes has stained the Way;
A hundred thousand creatures, as you say,
Address themselves to this great enterprise –
How many die, a useless sacrifice!
On such a road the best of men are cowed,
Hoods hide the frightened features of the proud –
What chance have timid souls? What chance have I?
If I set out it’s certain I shall die!’

The hoopoe admonishes him

The hoopoe said: ‘Your heart’s congealed like ice;
When will you free yourself from cowardice?
Since you have such a short time to live here,
What difference does it make? What should you fear?
The world is filth and sin, and homeless men
Must enter it and homeless leave again.
They die, as worms, in squalid pain; if we

lines 1748–69

Must perish in this quest, that, certainly,
Is better than a life of filth and grief.
If this great search is vain, if my belief
Is groundless, it is right that I should die.
So many errors throng the world – then why
Should we not risk this quest? To suffer blame
For love is better than a life of shame.
No one has reached this goal, so why appeal
To those whose blindness claims it is unreal?
I’d rather die deceived by dreams than give
My heart to home and trade and never live.
We’ve seen and heard so much – what have we learned?
Not for one moment has the Self been spurned;
Fools gather round and hinder our release:
When will their stale, insistent whining cease?
We have no freedom to achieve our goal
Until from Self and fools we free the soul.
To be admitted past the veil you must
Be dead to all the crowd considers just.
Once past the veil you understand the Way
From which the crowd’s glib courtiers blindly stray.
If you have any will, leave women’s stories,
And even if this search for hidden glories
Proves blasphemy at last, be sure our quest
Is not mere talk but an exacting test.
The fruit of love’s great tree is poverty;
Whoever knows this knows humility.
When love has pitched his tent in someone’s breast,
That man despairs of life and knows no rest.

Love's pain will murder him, then blandly ask
A surgeon's fee for managing the task –
The water that he drinks brings pain, his bread
Is turned to blood immediately shed;
Though he is weak, faint, feebler than an ant,
Love forces him to be her combatant;
He cannot take one mouthful unaware
That he is floundering in a sea of care.

lines 1770–90

Sheikh Noughani at Neishapour

Sheikh Noughani set out for Neishapour.
The way was more than he could well endure
And he fell sick- he spent a hungry week
Huddled in tattered clothes, alone and weak.
But after seven days had passed he cried:
"Dear God, send bread." An unseen voice replied:
"Go, sweep the dirt of Neishapour's main square,
And with the grain of gold that you find there
Buy bread and eat." The sheikh abruptly said:
"If I'd a broom I wouldn't beg for bread,
But I have nothing, as you plainly see;
Give me some bread and stop tormenting me!"
The voice said: "Calm yourself, you need not weep –
If you want bread take up your broom and sweep."
The sheikh crawled out and publicized his grief
Till he was lent a broom and sweeper's sieve.
He swept the filthy square as he'd been told,
And in his last sieve's dust-heap found the gold.
He hurried to the baker's, bought his bread –
Thoughts of the broom and sieve then filled his head.
He stopped short in his tracks; the shining grain
Was spent and he was destitute again.
He wandered aimlessly until he found
A ruined hut, and on the stony ground
He flung himself headlong; to his surprise
The broom and sieve appeared before his eyes.

Joy seized the old man – then he cried: “O Lord,
Why must I toil so hard for my reward?
You tell me to exhaust myself for bread!”
“Bread needs the sauce of work,” the Lord’s voice said;
“Since bread is not enough, I will increase
The sauce that makes it tasty; work in peace!”

A simpleton walked naked through the crowd,
And seeing such fine clothes he cried aloud:

lines 1791–1810

“God give me joy like theirs.” A voice replied:
“I give the sun’s kind warmth; be satisfied.”
He said: “My Lord, the sun clothes you, not me!”
The voice said: “Wait ten days, then you will see
The garment I provide.” Ten days had gone;
A poor man offered to this simpleton
A ragged cloak made up of scraps and shreds.*
“You’ve spent ten days with patches and old threads
Stitching this cloak,” the madman said; “I’ll bet
You spoiled a treasury of clothes to get
So many bits together – won’t you tell
Your servant where you learned to sew so well?”
The answer came: “In His great court one must
Be humble as His royal highway’s dust;
So many, kindled by His glory, come –
But few will ever reach the longed-for home.”

A story about Rabe’eh

Saint Rabe’eh for seven years had trod
The pilgrimage to Mecca and her God.
Now drawing near the goal she cried: “At last
I’ve reached the Ka’abah’s stone; my trials are past” –
Just at that moment the aspiring saint
Succumbed to woman’s intimate complaint –
She was impure; she turned aside and said:

“For seven years a pilgrim’s life I’ve led,
And as I reach the throng of pilgrims He
Plants this unlooked-for thorn to hinder me;
Dear God, give access to your glorious home,
Or send me back the weary way I’ve come.”
No lover lived as true as Rabe’eh,
Yet look, she too was hindered on the Way.
When first you enter Wisdom’s sea, beware –
A wave of indecision floods you there.

lines 1811–25

You worship at the Ka’abah’s shrine and then
You’re weeping in some worthless pagan’s den;
If from this whirlpool you can raise your head,
Tranquillity will take the place of dread.
But if you sink into its swirl alone
Your head will seem some mill’s enormous stone;
The least distraction will divert your mind
From that tranquillity you hoped to find.

A troubled fool

A saintly fool lived in a squalid place.
One day he saw the Prophet face to face,
Who said to him: “In your life’s work I see
The signs of heaven-sent tranquillity.”
“Tranquillity! When I can’t get away
From hungry fleas by night or flies by day!
A tiny gnat got into Nimrod’s brain
And by its buzzing sent the man insane;
I seem the Nimrod of this time – flies, fleas,
Mosquitoes, gnats do with me as they please!”’

A bird complains of his sinfulness

Another bird complained: ‘Sin stains my soul;

How can the wicked ever reach our goal?
How can a soul unclean as noisome flies
Toward the Simorgh's mountains hope to rise?
When sinners leave the path, what power can bring
Such stragglers to the presence of our king?'

And the hoopoe answers him

The answer came: 'You speak from ignorance;
Do not despair of His benevolence.
Seek mercy from Him; throw away your shield,
And by submission gain the longed-for field.

lines 1826–47

The gate stands open to contrition's way –
If you have sinned, squeeze through it while you may,
And if you travel with an honest heart,
You too will play the victor's glorious part.

Shame forced a vicious sinner to repent.
Once more his strength returned, once more he went
Down his old paths of wickedness and lust;
Leaving the Way, he wallowed in his dust.
But pain welled in his heart, his life became –
A second time – the source of bitter shame.
Since sin had brought him nothing but despair,
He wanted to repent, but did not dare;
His looks betrayed more agitation than
Ripe corn grains jumping in a heated pan –
His heart was racked by grief and warring fears;
The highway's dust was laid by his sad tears.
But in the dawn he heard a voice: "The Lord
Was merciful when first you pledged your word.
You broke it and again I gave you time,
Asking no payment for this newer crime;
Poor fool – would you repent once more? My gate
Stands open always; patiently I wait."

Gabriel and the unbeliever

One night in paradise good Gabriel heard
The Lord say: “I am here”, and at His word
There came another voice which wept and prayed –
“Who knows whose voice this is?” the angel said.
“It comes from one, of this at least I’m sure,
Who has subdued the Self, whose heart is pure.”
But no one in the heavens knew the man,
And Gabriel swooped toward the earth to scan
The deserts, seas and mountains – far and wide
He searched, without success, until he cried
For God to lead his steps. “Seek him in Rome,”

lines 1848–67

God said. “A pagan temple is his home.”
There Gabriel went and saw the man in tears –
A worthless idol ruled his hopes and fears.
Astonished, Gabriel turned and said: “Tell me,
Dear Lord, the meaning of this mystery;
You answer with your kindness one who prays
Before a senseless idol all his days!”
And God replied: “He does not know our Way;
Mere ignorance has led this man astray –
I understand the cause of his disgrace
And will not coldly turn aside My face;
I shall admit him to My sanctuary
Where kindness will convert his blasphemy”.’

The hoopoe paused and raised his voice in prayer,
Then said: ‘This man for whom God showed such care
Was one like you – and if you cannot bring
Great virtues to the presence of our king,
Do not alarm yourself; the Lord will bless
The saint’s devotions and your nothingness.

A sufi who wanted to buy something for nothing

A voice rang out one morning in Baghdad:
“My honey’s sweet, the best that can be had –
The price is cheap; now who will come and buy?”
A sufi passing in a street nearby
Asked: “Will you sell for nothing?” But he laughed:
“Who gives his goods for nothing? Don’t be daft!”
A voice came then: “My sufi, turn aside –
A few steps higher – and be satisfied.
For nothing We shall give you everything;
If you want more, that ‘more’ We’ll also bring.
Know that Our mercy is a glittering sun;
No particle escapes its brilliance, none –
Did We not send to sin and blasphemy
Our Prophet as a sign of clemency?”

lines 1868–84

God remonstrates with Moses

God said: “Gharoun has ten times seven times,
Dear Moses, begged forgiveness for his crimes –
Still you ignore him, though his soul is free
From all the twisting growths of blasphemy;
I have uprooted them and now prepare
A robe of grace in answer to his prayer.
You have destroyed him; wound has followed wound;
You force his head to bow down to the ground –
If you were his Creator you would give
Some respite to this suffering fugitive.”
One who shows mercy to the merciless
Brings mercy close to Godlike blessèdness;
The ocean of God’s grace is infinite –
Our sins are like a tear dissolved in it.
How could His mercy change? – it can contain
No trace of temporal corruption’s stain.
One who accuses sinners takes the part
Of tyranny, and bears a tyrant’s heart.

A sinner enters heaven

A sinner died, and, as his coffin passed,
A man who practised every prayer and fast
Turned ostentatiously aside – how could
He pray for one of whom he knew no good?
He saw the sinner in his dreams that night,
His face transfigured with celestial light.
“How did you enter heaven’s gates,” he said,
“A sinner stained with filth from foot to head?”
“God saw your merciless, disdainful pride,
And pitied my poor soul,” the man replied.

What generous love His wisdom here displays!
His part is mercy, ours is endless praise;
His Wisdom’s like a crow’s wing in the night –
He sends a child out with a taper’s light,
line 1885–1903
And then a wind that quenches this thin flame;
The child will suffer words of scathing blame,
But in that narrow darkness he will find
The thousand ways in which his Lord is kind.
If all were pure of all iniquity,
God could not show His generosity;
The end of Wisdom is for God to show –
Perpetually – His love to those below.
One drop of God’s great Wisdom will be yours,
A sea of mercy with uncharted shores;
My child, the seven heavens, day and night,
For your sake wage their old unwearied fight;
For your sake angels pray – your love and hate
Reflected back are hell’s or heaven’s gate.
The angels have bowed down to you and drowned
Your soul in Being, past all plummet’s sound –
Do not despise yourself, for there is none
Who could with you sustain comparison;
Do not torment yourself – your soul is All,
Your body but a fleeting particle.
This All will clarify, and in its light
Each particle will shine, distinctly bright –
As flesh remains an agent of the soul,

Your soul's an agent of the sacred Whole.
But "part" and "whole" must disappear at last;
The Way is one, and number is surpassed.
A hundred thousand clouds above you press;
Their rain is pure, unending happiness;
And when the desert blooms with flowers, their scent
And beauty minister to your content;
The prayers of all the angels, all they do,
All their obedience, God bestows on you.

The angels' jealousy of man

Abbasseh said: "At God's last Judgement Day,
When panic urges men to run away

lines 1904–18

And at the same time paralyses them,
When sinners stumble, overwhelmed by shame,
When terror seizes on the human race,
And each man seeks to hide his anguished face,
Then God, whom all the earth and heavens adore,
Will His unstinted benedictions pour
On man, the handful of unworthy dust.
The angels will cry out: 'Lord, is this just,
That man, before us all, take precedence?'
And God will say: 'There is no consequence
Of loss or gain in this for you, but man
Has reached the limit of his earthly span –
Hunger must always be supplied with bread;
A mortal nation clamours to be fed'."'

An indecisive bird complains

Another bird declared: 'As you
can see,

I lack the organs of virility;
Each moment I prefer a
different tree –
I'm drunk, devout, the world's, then (briefly) His;
Caught between "No, it isn't", "Yes, it is".
The flesh will send me drinking, then I'll find
The praise of God awakening in my mind;
What should I do between these two extremes,
Imprisoned by conflicting needs and dreams?'

And the hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'This troubles everyone;
What man is truly single-minded? None!
If all of us could boast a spotless mind,
Why should the prophets mingle with mankind?
If it is love which prompts your fervent prayers,
A hundred kindnesses will calm your cares.
Life is an obstinate young colt –
until He's broken in by your restraining will

lines 1919–35

He knows no peace; but you are indolent,
Stretched out beside the oven, warm, content.
Tears temper hearts; but living well's a rust
That inch by inch reduces them to dust –
You're just a eunuch pampering his needs;
Your Self's grown gross, a dog that sleeps and feeds.

A story about Shebli

Shebli would disappear at times; no one
In all Baghdad could guess where he had gone –

At last they found him where the town enjoys
The sexual services of men and boys,
Sitting among the catamites; his eye
Was moist and humid, and his lips bone-dry.
One asked: “What brings you here, to such a place?
Is this where pilgrims come to look for grace?”
He answered: “In the world’s way these you see
Aren’t men or women; so it is with me –
For in the way of Faith I’m neither man
Nor woman, but ambiguous courtesan –
Unmanliness reproaches me, then blame
For my virility fills me with shame.”
The man of understanding puts aside,
To travel on this path, all outward pride
(The courage of his choice will honour those
Who taught this pilgrim everything he knows).
If you seem more substantial than a hair,
You’ve made an idol of yourself – take care,
Whatever praise or blame may say of you,
You’re an idolater in all you do.
As Truth’s sworn slave, beware of Azar’s ways
Who carved the stone to which he offered praise –
Devotion is the crown of all mankind;
Leave Uzza* and such idols far behind.

lines 1936–53

You seem a sufi to the common folk
But hide a hundred idols with your cloak –
If you’re a eunuch underneath, don’t dress
In clothes of high heroic manliness!

Two sufis go to court

One day two dressed as wandering sufis came
Before the courts to lodge a legal claim.
The judge took them aside. “This can’t be right,
For sufis to provoke a lawyers’ fight,”
He said. “You wear the robes of resignation,

So what have you to do with litigation?
If you're the men to pay a lawyer's fee,
Off with your sufi clothes immediately!
And if you're sufis as at first I thought,
It's ignorance that brings you to this court.
I'm just a judge, unversed in your affair,
But I'm ashamed to see the clothes you wear;
You should wear women's veils – that would be less
Dishonest than your present holy dress."

How will you solve love's secret lore if you –
Not man, not woman – glide between the two?
If on its path love forces you to yield,
Then do so gladly, throw away your shield;
Resist and you will die, your soul is dead –
To ward off your defeat bow down your head!

A pauper in love with the king of Egypt

A poor man fell in love with Egypt's king,
Who heard the news and ordered guards to bring
The wretch to him. "You love the king," he said;
"Now choose: give up your home here or your head –
You must make up your mind between these two,
Exile or death. Well, which seems best to you?"

lines 1954–69

For all his love this pauper wasn't brave;
His choice was exile rather than the grave.
He left; the king's command came loud and clear:
"Cut off his head at once and bring it here."
The porter said: "But he is innocent;
Why should my lord command this punishment?"
"He did not really love," the king replied.
"Though he pretended love for me, he lied:
If he were valiant in love he would
Have chosen death here as the highest good.

If one prefers his head to love, then he
Must pay to love the traitor's penalty –
Had he required my head, at his command
There would have been no lord to rule this land;
I would have worn his livery, a king
Would have become his slave in everything –
But he resisted love, and it is right
That he should lose his head in such a fight.
The man who leaves me, though he rave and cry,
Is an impostor and his love's a lie –
I say this as a warning to that crowd
Whose boasts of love for me ring long and loud".'

A bird complains of the Self

One of the birds then said: 'My enemy's
That veteran of highway robberies,
My Self; how can I travel on the Way

With such a follower? The dog won't pay
The least attention to a word I say –
The dog I knew is gone and in his place
A slavering wolf stalks by me, pace for pace.'

And the hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'How has this dog betrayed
And brought to dust whatever plans you made!

lines 1970–87

The Self's squint-eyed and cannot guide you well,

Part dog, part parasite, part infidel.
When you are praised your Self swells up with pride
(Aware that praise is quite unjustified);
There's no hope for the Self – the dog grows fatter
The more it hears men fawn, deceive and flatter.
What is your childhood but a negligence,
A time of carelessness and ignorance?
What is your youth but madness, strife and danger,
Knowledge that in this world you are a stranger?
What is your age but torpid helplessness,
The flesh and spirit sapped by long distress?
Until this dog, the Self, can be subdued,
Our life is folly, endlessly renewed;
If all of life from birth to death is vain,
Blank nothingness will be our only gain –
Such slaves the Self owns! What a catalogue!
How many rush to worship this foul dog!
The Self is hell – a furnace belching fire,
An icy pit as Pride succeeds Desire,
And though a hundred thousand die of grief,
That this same dog should die is past belief.

A gravedigger

A man who lived by digging graves survived
To ripe old age. A neighbour said: "You've thrived
For years, digging away in one routine –
Tell us the strangest thing you've ever seen."
He said: "All things considered, what's most strange
Is that for seventy years without a change
That dog, my Self, has seen me digging graves,
Yet neither dies, nor alters, nor behaves!"

Abbasseh's description of the Self

One night Abbasseh said: "The world could be
Thronged with wild infidels and blasphemy,

Or it could be a place of pious works,
Filled with the faithful, keen as zealous Turks.
Instead the prophets came – that infidel
The Self must choose between the faith and hell
(One seemed too difficult, one terrified –
How could the indecisive soul decide?).
Beneath the Self's reign we are infidels
And nourish blasphemy in all our cells;
Its life is stubborn, strong, intractable –
To kill it seems well-nigh impossible.
It draws its strength from both alternatives;
No wonder it so obstinately lives.
But if the heart can rule, then day and night
This dog will labour for the heart's delight,
And when the heart rides out he sprints away
Eager to flush his noble master's prey.
Whoever chains this dog will find that he
Commands the lion of eternity;
Whoever binds this dog, his sandals' dust
Surpasses all the councils of the just."

A king questions a sufi

A ragged pilgrim of the sufis' Way
By chance met with a king, and heard him say:
"Who's better, me or you?" The old man said:
"Silence, your words are empty as your head!
Although self-praise is not our normal rule
(The man who loves himself is still a fool),
I'll tell you, since I must, that one like me
Exceeds a thousand like your majesty.
Since you find no delight in faith – alas,
Your Self has made of you, my lord, an ass
And sat on you, and set its load on you –
You're just its slave in everything you do;
You wear its halter, follow its commands,
A no-one, left completely in its hands.

My study is to reach Truth's inmost shrine –
And I am not my Self's ass, he is mine;
Now since the beast I ride on rides on you,
That I'm your better is quite plainly true.
You love the Self – it's lit in you a fire
Of nagging lust, insatiable desire,
A blaze that burns your vigour, wastes your heart,
Leaving infirmity in every part –
Consuming all your strength, till deaf and blind
You're old, forgetful, rambling in your mind."

This man, and hundreds like him, constitute
The mighty phalanx of the Absolute;
When such an army charges you will find
You and your puny Self are left behind.
How you delight in this dog's partnership –
But it's the dog, not you, that cracks the whip!
The forces of the king will separate
This dog and you – why not anticipate
Their order and forestall the pain? If though
You weep that here on earth you cannot know
Enough of this audacious infidel –
Don't worry; you'll be comrades down in hell.

Two foxes

Two foxes met, and tasted such delight
They could not let each other out of sight.
But then a king came hunting on the plain
And parted them. "Where shall we meet again?"
She yelped. He barked back as he reached their hole:
"At the furrier's, dear – hung up as a stole!"'

A bird complains of pride

Another said: 'Whenever I decide

To seek His presence, that arch-devil Pride

lines 2028–43

‘Obstructs my path. I can’t fight back with force;
Against his specious talk I’ve no recourse.
How can I find salvation from his lies,
Drink down the wine of meaning and be wise?’

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: ‘This devil never leaves
Until the Self has gone; if he deceives
You now, his cunning is your own deceit –
Your wishes are the devil, you the cheat!
If you accomplish one desire, a shoal
Of struggling demons rises in your soul;
The world’s a furnace and a prison cell,
The devil’s province, an unending hell –
Draw back your hand from it if you would win
An unmolested life secure from sin.

The devil complains

A sluggard once approached a fasting saint
And, baffled by despair, made this complaint:
“The devil is a highwayman, a thief,
Who’s ruined me and robbed me of belief.”
The saint replied: “Young man, the devil too
Has made his way here to complain – of you.
‘My province is the world,’ I heard him say;
‘Tell this new pilgrim of God’s holy Way
To keep his hands off what is mine – if I
Attack him it’s because his fingers pry
In my affairs; if he will leave me be,
He’s no concern of mine and can go free’.”

One dear to God addressed Malek Dinar:
“I’ve lost myself – but tell me how you are.”

lines 2044–63

He said: “I get my bread from God’s own hands,
Then carry out the Evil One’s commands.”

Your vaunted faith is wordy insolence;
The devil strikes, and you have no defence –
This world’s grief clings to you, yet you decide
You’re ready for our quest! God damn your pride!
I said “Give up the world”, and now I say
Stand firm to be admitted to the Way;
If you have given Him this earthly show
When will you spread your hands and let it go?
Your sloth has drowned you in a sea of greed;
You don’t know why you wait or what you need –
Though earth and heaven weep you seek out sin;
Greed blunts your faith, passion corrupts within.
What is this world, this nest of greed and lust,
But leavings of oppression, windswept dust?
Here tyranny intensified its reign,
Here cruelty struck and left an emptied plain.
God calls this world a nothing, but its snare
Has trapped you, and you struggle in despair –
When will you die to such unhappiness
And take the hand that leads you from distress?
Can one who’s lost in nothing rightly claim
The attributes of man, much less the name?
The creature who abandons what he sought
For nothing’s sake is nought and less than nought.
What is this world’s work? – idle lethargy,
That idleness a long captivity.
What is the world but a consuming pyre,
Where nation follows nation to the fire?
And when its flames turn night to blinding day,
The lion-hearted hero runs away –

To close your eyes and flee is courage here,
Or like some fluttering moth you'll draw too near
And in the blaze be burnt; to worship flame
Is drunken pride, the path to death and shame.

lines 2064–78

'The fire surrounds you, and with every breath
The scorching flames reach out and threaten death;
But they are quenched when we achieve our goal,
And look – there waits asylum for your soul.

A rich lord and a dervish

At public prayers a great lord cried: "O God,
Have mercy on me now and spare the rod!"
A crazy dervish heard his prayer and said:
"You dare to call His mercies on your head
When your behaviour seems to say 'The earth
Can hardly hold a person of my worth' –
You've raised a palace up against the sky,
Embellished it with gold to daze the eye;
Ten boys and ten young girls await your whim,
What claim have you on mercy or on Him?
Look on your life, on all that you possess –
There isn't room for mercy in this mess!
If Fate gave you my daily round of bread,
Then you could call down mercies on your head.
Shame on you, man! Until you turn aside
From power and wealth and all your stinking pride,
There's nothing to be done – turn now, and see
How like a hero you can still break free."

Death-bed repentance

A true believer said: "There is a crowd
Who when they come to die will cry aloud
And turn to God. But they are fools; they should

Have spent their lives in seeking what is good.
When leaves are falling it's too late to sow;
Repentance on a death-bed is too slow –
The time to turn aside has flown; be sure
Whoever waits till then will die impure".'

lines 2079–94

A miserly bird

Another bird said: 'I love gold alone;
It's life to me, like marrow to a bone –
When I have gold I blossom like a flower;
With restless pride I revel in its power.'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said:
'Appearances delight
The heart that cannot see
Truth's dawning light;
You are as blind by day as in
the night –
Your life's a crawling ant's. What essence lies
In surfaces? A void! Direct your eyes
To meaning's core; gold is a stone, and you
Are like a child attracted by its hue.
It is an idol when it holds the soul
Back from its God – hide it in some dark hole!
And if it is a sovereign remedy
It also has a foul utility
(Men make a ring of it that stops a mule
From being covered). O unhappy fool,
Who's helped by all this gold? And what real pleasure

Can you derive from heaps of glittering treasure?
If you can give a dervish just a grain
You'll nag at him, or wish it back again!
It's true that backed by gold you'll never lack
For friends – your friendship's brand burns every back!
Each month you count the profits from your trade,
What trade! – your soul's been sold, the bargain's made.
Life's sweetness passes and you spend your time
Scrabbling for farthings – isn't this a crime?
You give this All for nothing, while your heart
Is given wholly to the merchant's art;
But underneath your gibbet I shall wait
Until its steps are jerked away by Fate.

lines 2095–2115

How many dines you'11 hang! Each sliding noose
Will seem a hundred burning flames — what use
Will your religion, gold, be to you then?
Or when you're drowned, your business acumen?
In that last tumult as you gasp for air
You'll know your doom and shriek in wild despair.
Remember the Koran: "You cannot gain
Salvation while the things you love remain."
You must abandon all things that exist;
Even the soul itself must be dismissed –
Renounce its fellowship; it too must go,
Along with all you own and all you know.
If you have made this world a place for sleep,
Your bed's the load that makes the Way so steep
Burn it! and pass beyond what merely seems;
You can't deceive the Truth with sleepy dreams.
Let fear persuade you, and the fire is lit;
Burn your bed now if you would rise from it.

The novice who had some gold

A novice hid a little store of gold.
His sheikh knew this, although he'd not been told.

There was a journey that they had to make –
The two set out, the young man and his sheikh;
Then night came to the valley where they walked,
And into two the path they followed forked.
The novice trembled for his hidden gold
(Which makes its owners rather less than bold);
"Which way do you advise?" he asked his sheikh.
"There are two paths; which is the best to take?"
The sheikh said: "Throw out what you cannot hide,
Then either way will do – as you decide."
Let gold win someone's heart, and when that's done
Even the Devil, out of fear, will run
(When gold is weighed what arguments ensue:
"One grain too many!""No, one grain too few!");

lines 2116–32

In ways of faith he's like an ass that's lame,
Cast down, preoccupied and full of shame –
A king when cheating people, but a fool
When faith is mentioned – a bewildered mule.
The man whom shining gold can lead astray
Is captured by the world, he's lost the Way.
Remember Joseph and beware this well;
Tread carefully; it leads to death and hell.

Rabe'eh and the two grains of silver

A sheikh of Basra said to Rabe'eh:
"How much you have endured along love's Way!
And all this strength is from yourself – tell me
The source of your profound ability,
This inward light which you have neither read
Nor learnt nor copied." Saint Rabe'eh said:

"Great sheikh, I simply spin
coarse cotton thread;
I sell this and am satisfied to get
Two grains of silver – though I never yet
Held both these grains together in my palm,
But one in either hand. I fear the harm
That follows from the clink of coin on coin,
The sleepless nights when sums of money join."

The worldly man's embroiled in bloody cares,

Laying a hundred thousand different snares
Until unlawfully he gets his gold,
And promptly dies! Before his body's cold,
The eager heir has claimed his property,
His legal right to strife and misery.
You sell the Simorgh for this gold; its light
Has made your heart a candle in the night!
We seek the Way of perfect Unity,
Where no one counts his own prosperity;
But you are like an ant that's led astray
Too easily from our strict, narrow Way –

lines 2133–49

The strait path offers no deceitful smiles;
What living creature can endure its trials?

The hermit who listened to a bird

A man divinely blessed filled all his days
For twice two hundred years with sacred praise.
He lived alone where no man ever trod
And, hidden by Truth's veil, conversed with God
(His one companion was the Lord, and He
Makes other friends a useless luxury).
His garden had a tree – this tree a guest;
For there a lovely bird had built its nest.

Such sweetly trilling songs poured from its throat,
A hundred secrets lurked in every note!
Charmed by this liquid voice the hermit found
Companionship in its beguiling sound.
God called the prophet of that time and said:
"We must reproach this man: 'The life you've led
Has day and night been given up to prayer;
For years you burnt with love – and now you dare
To sell Me for the singing of a bird,
The willing dupe of that fine voice you heard!
I've bought and cared for you – your negligence
Has cheaply sold me off as recompense:
I pay the price for you, you auction Me,
Is this your meaning for "fidelity"?
I am the one Companion you should keep,
Not some quick bargain to be marked down "cheap"'."'

An ostentatious bird

Another bird declared: 'My happiness
Comes from the splendid things which I possess:
My palace walls inlaid with gold excite
Astonishment in all who see the sight.
They are a world of joy to me – how could

lines 2150–65

I wrench my heart from this surpassing good?
There I am king; all bow to my commands –
Shall I court ruin in the desert sands?
Shall I give up this realm, and live without
My certain glory in a world of doubt?
What rational mind would give up paradise
For wanderings filled with pain and sacrifice?'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: ‘Ungrateful wretch! Are you
A dog that you should need a kennel too?
This world’s a kennel’s filthy murk at best;
Your palace is a kennel with the rest.
If it seems paradise, at your last breath
You’ll know it is your dungeon after death.
There’d be no harm in palaces like yours,
Did not the thought of death beat at our doors.

A king who built a splendid palace

A king who loved his own magnificence
Once built a palace and spared no expense.
When this celestial building had been raised,
The gorgeous carpets and its splendour dazed
The crowd that pressed around – a servant flung
Trays heaped with money to the scrabbling throng.
The king now summoned all his wisest friends
And said: “What do I lack? Who recommends
Improvements to my court?” “We must agree,”
They said, “no man could now or ever see,
In all the earth, a palace built like this.”
An old ascetic spoke. “One thing’s amiss,”
He said; “there’s one particular you lack.
This noble structure has a nasty crack
(Though if it weren’t for that it would suffice
To be the heavenly court of paradise).”
The king replied: “What crack? Where is it? Where?

lines 2166–79

If you’ve come here for trouble, then take care!”
The man said: “Lord, it is the truth I tell –
And through that crack will enter Azra’el.*
It may be you can block it, but if not,
Then throne and palace are not worth a jot!
Your palace now seems like some heavenly prize,
But death will make it ugly to your eyes;
Nothing remains for ever and you know –

Although you live here now- that this is so.
Don't pride yourself on things that cannot last;
Don't gallop your high-stepping horse so fast.
If one like me is left to indicate
Your faults to you, I pity your sad fate."

A merchant gives a party

To gratify his busy self-esteem,
A merchant built a mansion like a dream,
And when the preparations were all done,
He regally invited everyone
To an enormous entertainment there,
At which they'd feast and dutifully stare.
But running self-importantly around,
He met a begging fool, who stood his ground
And mocked the merchant's diligence. "My lord,"
He said, "I'm desolate (O, rest assured!)
That I can't come and drink your health, but I'm
So busy that I really haven't time –
You will forgive me?" and he gave a grin.
"Of course," the merchant answered, taken in.

The spider

You've seen an active spider work – he seems
To spend his life in self-communing dreams;
In fact the web he spins is evidence

lines 2180–97

That he's endowed with some far-sighted sense.
He drapes a corner with his cunning snare
And waits until a fly's entangled there,
Then dashes out and sucks the meagre blood
Of his bewildered, buzzing, dying food.
He'll dry the carcass then, and live off it
For days, consuming bit by tasty bit –

Until the owner of the house one day
Will reach up casually to knock away
The cunning spider's home – and with her broom
She clears both fly and spider from the room.

Such is the world, and one who feeds there is
A fly trapped by that spider's subtleties;
If all the world is yours, it will pass by
As swiftly as the blinking of an eye;
And though you boast of kings and patronage,
You are a child, an actor on a stage.
Don't seek for wealth unless you are a fool;
A herd of cows is all that you can rule!
Whoever lives for banners, drums and glory
Is dead; the dervish understands this story
And calls it windy noise–winds vainly flap
The banners, hollowly the brave drums tap.
Don't gallop on the horse of vanity;
Don't pride yourself on your nobility.
They skin the leopard for his splendid pelt;
They'll flay you too before your nose has smelt
A whiff of danger. When your life's made plain,
Which will be better, death or chastening pain?
You cannot hold your head up then – obey!
How long must you persist in childish play?
Either give up your wealth or lay aside
The rash pretensions of your crazy pride.
Your palace and your gardens! They're your gaol,
The dungeon where your ruined soul will wail,
Forsake this dusty pride, know what it's worth;

lines 2198–2213

Give up your restless pacing of the earth.
To see the Way, look with the eyes of thought;
Set out on it and glimpse the heavenly court –
And when you reach that souls' asylum, then
Its glory will blot out the world of men.

The restless fool and the dervish

A fool dashed onward at a reckless pace
Till in the desert he came face to face
With one who wore the ragged dervish cloak,
And asked: “What is your work?” The dervish spoke:
“Poor shallow wretch, can you not see I faint
With this strict pressure of the world’s constraint?”
“Constraint? That can’t be right,” the man replied;
“The empty desert stretches far and wide.”
The dervish said: “If there is no strict Way,
How has it led you to me here today?”

A myriad promises beguile your mind,
But flames of greed are all that you can find.
What are such flames? Tread down the world’s desire,
And like a lion shun this raging fire.
Accomplish this, and you will find your heart;
There waits your palace, pure in every part.
Fire blocks the path, the goal is long delayed –
Your heart’s a captive and your soul’s afraid,
But in the midst of such an enterprise
You will escape this universe of lies.
When worldly pleasures cloy, prepare to die –
The world gives neither name nor truth, pass by!
The more you see of it the less you see,
How often must I warn you to break free?

Seeing the world

A mourner following a coffin cried:
“You hardly saw the world, and yet you’ve died.”

lines 2214–29

A fool remarked: “Such noise! You’d think that he
Had seen the world himself repeatedly!”

If you would take the world with you, you must
Descend with all the world unseen to dust;
You rush to savour life, and so life goes
While you ignore the balm for all its woes;
Until the Self is sacrificed your soul
Is lost in filth, divided from its goal.

A perfumed wood was burning, and its scent
Made someone sigh with somnolent content.
One said to him: “Your sigh means ecstasy;
Think of the wood, whose sigh means misery”.’

A bird who cannot leave his beloved

‘Great hoopoe,’ said another bird, ‘my love
Has loaded me with chains, I cannot move.
This bandit, Love, confronted me and stole
My intellect, my heart, my inmost soul –
The image of her face is like a thief
Who fires the harvest and leaves only grief.
Without her I endure the pangs of hell,
Raving and cursing like an infidel;
How can I travel when my heart must stay
Lapped here in blood? And on that weary Way,
How many empty valleys lie ahead,
How many horrors wait for us? I dread
One moment absent from her lovely face;
How could I seek the Way and leave this place?
My pain exceeds all cure or remedy;
I’ve passed beyond both faith and blasphemy –
My blasphemy and faith are love for her;
My soul is her abject idolater –
And though companionless I weep and groan,
My friend is sorrow; I am not alone.
My love has brought me countless miseries,

But in her hair lie countless mysteries;
Without her face, blood chokes me, I am drowned,
I'm dust blown aimlessly across the ground.
Believe me, everything I say is true –
This is my state; now tell me what to do.'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'You are the prisoner of
Appearances, a superficial love;
This love is not divine; it is mere greed
For flesh – an animal, instinctive need.
To love what is deficient, trapped in time,
Is more than foolishness, it is a crime –
And blasphemous the struggle to evade
That perfect beauty which can never fade.
You would compare a face of blood and bile
To the full moon – yet what could be more vile
In all the world than that same face when blood
And bile are gone? – it is no more than mud.
This is the fleshly beauty you adore;
This is its being, this and nothing more.
How long then will you seek for beauty here?
Seek the unseen, and beauty will appear.
When that last veil is lifted neither men
Nor all their glory will be seen again,
The universe will fade – this mighty show
In all its majesty and pomp will go,
And those who-loved appearances will prove
Each other's enemies and forfeit love,
While those who loved the absent, unseen Friend
Will enter that pure love which knows no end.

Shebli and a man whose friend had died

Once Shebli saw a poor wretch weeping. "Why
These tears?" the sheikh inquired. "What makes you cry?"

He said: “O sheikh, I had a friend whose face

lines 2248–64

Refreshed my soul with its young, candid grace –
But yesterday he died; since then I’m dead,
There’s nothing that could dry the tears I shed.”
The sheikh replied: “And is that all you miss?
Don’t grieve, my friend, you’re worth much more than this.
Choose now another friend who cannot die –
For His death you will never have to cry.
The friend from whom, through death, we must soon part
Brings only sorrow to the baffled heart;
Whoever loves the world’s bright surfaces
Endures in love a hundred miseries;
Too soon the surface flees his groping hand,
And sorrow comes which no man can withstand.”

A merchant who sold his favourite slave

There was a merchant once who had a slave
As sweet as sugar how did he behave?
He sold that girl beyond comparison –
And O, how he regretted what he’d done
He offered her new master heaps of gold
And would have paid her price a thousandfold;
His heart4n flames, his poor head in a whirl,
He begged her owner to resell the girl.
But he was adamant and would not sell;
The merchant paced the street, his mind in hell,
And groaned: “I cannot bear this searing pain
But anyone who gives his love for gain,
Who stitches tight the eyes of common-sense
Deserves as much for his improvidence –
To think that on that fatal market-day
I tricked myself and gave the best away.”

Your breaths are jewels, each atom is a guide

To lead you to the Truth, and glorified
From head to foot with His great wealth you stand;
O, if you could entirely understand
Your absence from Him, then you would not wait

lines 2265–82

Inured by patience to your wretched fate –
God nourished you in love and holy pride,
But ignorance detains you from His side.

A king and his greyhound

A royal hunt swept out across the plain.
The monarch called for someone in his train
To bring a greyhound, and the handler brought
A dark, sleek dog, intelligent, well-taught;
A jewelled gold collar sparkled at its throat,
Its back was covered by a satin coat –
Gold anklets clasped its paws; its leash was made
Of silk threads twisted in a glistening braid.
The king thought him a dog who'd understand,
And took the silk leash in his royal hand;
The dog ran just behind his lord, then found
A piece of bone abandoned on the ground –
He stooped to sniff, and when the king saw why,
A glance of fury flashed out from his eye.
"When you're with me," he said, "your sovereign king,
How dare you look at any other thing?"
He snapped the leash and to his handler cried:
"Let this ill-mannered brute roam far and wide.
He's mine no more – better for him if he
Had swallowed pins than found such liberty!"
The handler stared and tried to remonstrate:
"The dog, my lord, deserves an outcast's fate;
But we should keep the satin and the gold."
The king said: "No, do just as you are told;
Drive him, exactly as he is, away –
And when he comes back to himself some day,

He'll see the riches that he bears and know
That he was mine, a king's, but long ago."

And you, who had a king once as your friend,
And lost Him through your negligence, attend:

lines 2283–98

Give yourself wholly to the love of Truth;
Drink with this dragon like a reckless youth –
Now is the dragon's time – the lover must
Submit and see his throat's blood stain the dust;
What terrifies the human soul's so slight –
An ant at most – in this vast dragon's sight;
His lovers' thirst will not be quenched till they
Drink their own blood and take the selfless Way.

The martyrdom of Hallaj

Hallaj was taken to the gallows tree
And cried: "I am the Truth"; they could not see
The meaning of his words and hacked at him,
Tearing his bleeding carcass limb from limb.
Then as his face grew deathly pale he raised
The bleeding stumps of broken arms and glazed
His moon-like face with glittering blood. He said:
"Since it is blood which paints a man's face red,
I've painted mine that no one here may say
'Hallaj turned pale on that last bloody day' –
If any saw me pale they'd think that I
Felt fear to face my torturers and die –
My fear's of less than one hair's consequence;
Look on my painted face for evidence!
When he must die and sees the gallows near,
The hero's courage leaves no room for fear –
Since all the world is like a little 'O',
Why should I fear whatever it may show?
Who knows the seven-headed dragon's lair,

And sleeps and eats through summer's dog-days there,
Sees many games like this – the gallows seems
The least of all his transitory dreams."*

lines 2299–2314

That sea of faith, Junaid, in Baghdad once
Discoursed with such persuasive eloquence
It seemed the stars bowed down to hear him speak.
This stalwart guide and comfort of the weak
Delighted in his son, a lovely child
Who as his father lectured was beguiled
And murdered by a gang – they tossed his head
In that assembly's midst and quickly fled.
Junaid looked steadfastly at this cruel sight
And did not weep but said: "What seems tonight
So strange was certain from eternity;
What happens happens from necessity".'

A bird who fears death

Another bird spoke up: 'The Way is long,
And I am neither valiant nor strong.
I'm terrified of death; I know that I –
Before the first stage is complete – must die;
I tremble at the thought; when death draws near,
I know I'll shriek and groan in snivelling fear.
Whoever fights death with his sword will meet
Inevitable, absolute defeat;
His sword and hand lie smashed. Alas! What grief
They grasp who grasp the sword as their belief!'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'How feebly you complain!
How long will this worn bag of bones remain?
What are you but a few bones? – and at heart

Each bone is soft and hastens to depart.
Aren't you aware that life, from birth to death,
Is little more than one precarious breath?
That all who suffer birth must also die,
Their being scattered to the windy sky?
As you are reared to live, so from your birth

lines 2315–33

You're also rested to one day leave this earth.
The sky is like some huge, inverted bowl
Which sunset fills with blood from pole to pole –
The sun seems then an executioner,
Beheading thousands with his scimitar.
If you are profligate, if you are pure,
You are but water mixed with dust, no more –
A drop of trembling instability,
And can a drop resist the surging sea?
Though in the world you axe a king, you must
In sorrow and despair return to dust.

The phoenix

In India lives a bird that is unique:
The lovely phoenix has a long, hard beak
Pierced with a hundred holes, just like a flute –
It has no mate, its reign is absolute.
Each opening has a different sound; each sound
Means something secret, subtle and profound –
And as these shrill, lamenting notes are heard,
A silence falls on every listening bird;
Even the fish grow still. It was from this
Sad chant a sage learnt music's artifice.
The phoenix' life endures a thousand years
And, long before, he knows when death appears;
When death's sharp pangs assail his tiring heart,
And all signs tell him he must now depart,
He builds a pyre from logs and massy trees
And from its centre sings sad threnodies –

Each plaintive note trills out, from each pierced hole
Comes evidence of his untarnished soul –
Now like a mourner's ululating cries,
Now with an inward care the cadence dies –
And as he sings of death, death's bitter grief
Thrills through him and he trembles like a leaf.
Then drawn to him by his heart-piercing calls

lines 2334–55

The birds approach, and savage animals –
They watch, and watching grieve; each in his mind
Determines he will leave the world behind.
Some weep in sympathy and some grow faint;
Some die to hear his passionate complaint.
So death draws near, and as the phoenix sings
He fans the air with his tremendous wings,
A flame darts out and licks across the pyre –
Now wood and phoenix are a raging fire,
Which slowly sinks from that first livid flash
To soft, collapsing charcoal, then to ash:
The pyre's consumed – and from the ashy bed
A little phoenix pushes up its head.
What other creature can – throughout the earth –
After death takes him, to himself give birth?
If you were given all the phoenix' years,
Still you would have to die when death appears.
For years he sings in solitary pain
And must companionless, unmated, reign;
No children cheer his age and at his death
His ash is scattered by the wind's cold breath.
Now understand that none, however sly,
Can slip past death's sharp claws – we all must die;
None is immortal in the world's vast length;
This wonder shows no creature has the strength
To keep death's ruthless vehemence in check –
But we must soften his imperious neck;
Though many tasks will fall to us, this task
Remains the hardest that the Way will ask.

A mourning son

Before his father's coffin walked a son –
It seemed his tears would never cease to run.
"No day for me is like the day you died;
My wounded soul despairs," the poor man cried.
A passing sufi said: "And such a day

lines 2356–70

Has never come your wretched father's way!"
The son knows sorrow, but do not compare
Such grief with all his father has to bear.
You come into the world a helpless child,
And spend your life by foolishness beguiled –
How your heart longs for sovereignty! – alas,
Like wind through outstretched fingers you will pass.

A vice-roy at the point of death

A vice-roy lingered close to death. One said:
"You are in sight of secrets all men dread –
What do you feel?" "There's nothing I can say,"
The man replied, "except that every day'
I lived was wasted on what's trivial,
And now I shall be dust – and that is all."
To seek death is death's only cure – the leaf
Grows hectic and must fall; our life is brief.
Know we are born to die; the soul moves on;
The heart is pledged and hastens to be gone.
King Solomon, whose seal subdued all lands,
Is dust compounded with the desert sands,
And tyrants whose decrees spelt bloody doom
Decay to nothing in the narrow tomb:
How many sleep beneath the ground! And sleep
Like theirs is bitter, turbulent and deep.
Look hard at death – in our long pilgrimage
The grave itself is but the first grim stage;
How your sweet life would change if you could guess

The taste of death's unequalled bitterness.

Jesus and the stream

Once Jesus reached a clear stream's shaded bank –
He scooped up water in his palms and drank;
How sweet that water was! as if it were

lines 2371–88

Some rose-sweet sherbet or an elixir;
One with him filled a jug, and on they went.
When Jesus drank, to his astonishment,
The jug seemed filled with bitterness. "How strange,"
He said, "that water can so quickly change –
They were the same; what can this difference mean?
What tasted sweet is brackish and unclean!"
The jug spoke: "Lord, once I too had a soul
And was a man – but I have been a bowl,
A cruse, a pitcher of crude earthenware,
Remade a thousand times; and all forms share
The bitterness of death – which would remain

Though I were baked a thousand times again;
No water could be sweet which I contain."

O careless of your fate! From this jug learn,
And from your inattentive folly turn;
O pilgrim, you have lost yourself – before
Death takes you seek the hidden Way once more!
If while you live and breathe you fail to see
The nature of your own reality,
How can you search when dead? The man who lives
And does not strive is lost; his mother gives
Him life but he cannot become a man –

He strays, a self-deluded charlatan.
How many veils obstruct the sufi's quest,
How long his search till truth is manifest!

The death of Socrates

When Socrates lay close to death, a youth –
Who was his student in the search for truth –
Said: "Master, when we've washed the man we knew
And brought your shroud, where should we bury you?"
He said: "If you can find me when I've died,
Then bury me wherever you decide –
1 never found myself; I cannot see
How when I'm dead you could discover me.

lines 2389–2402

Throughout my life not one small particle
Had any knowledge of itself at all!"'

A bird complains of his bad luck

Another bird said: 'Hoopoe, it's no good.
Things never happen as I'd hoped they would;
I've spent my time in misery since birth,
The most unlucky wretch in all the earth –
My heart knows so much torment that it seems
Each atom of my body raves and screams;
My life has trodden out a hopeless way;
God damn me if I've had one happy day!
These sorrows lock me in myself – how can
I undertake this journey which you plan?
If I were happy I would gladly start;
What stops me is this sorrow in my heart.
What can I do? Look, I appeal to you –
I've told you everything, what can I do?'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: ‘How arrogant you are
To think your wretched self so singular!
The disappointments of this world will die
In less time than the blinking of an eye,
And as the earth must pass, pass by the earth –
Don’t even glance at it, know what it’s worth;
What empty foolishness it is to care
For what must one day be dispersed to air.

The man who refused to drink

There was a man advanced along the Way
Who always, to his puzzled friends’
dismay, Refused to drink sweet sherbet. “Why is this?”

lines 2403–16

One asked: “What could explain this prejudice?”
He said: “I see a man who stands on guard
And notes who drinks – his eyes are cold and hard,
And if I drank, the sweetest sherbet would,
I know, act like a poison in my blood.
While he stands here the contents of the bowl
Are liquid fire to sear the drinker’s soul.”
Whatever lasts a moment’s only worth
One barley grain – though it were all the earth;
How can I trust what has no rooted power
And holds existence for a transient hour?
If you achieve your every wish, why boast
Of glory insubstantial as a ghost?
If disappointments darken all your days,
You need not grieve, for nothing worldly stays –
It is your passion for magnificence
That prompts your tears, not fancied indigence.
What is your grief compared with all the pain
God’s martyrs suffered on Kerbelah’s plain?*
In His clear sight the hardships you endure

Show like a treasure, glittering and pure –
Each breath you breathe His kindness reaches you,
And untold love envelops all you do –
But you forget His grace, and negligence
Makes friendship look like meaningless pretence.

lines 2417–35

The king who gave his slave an apple

A good kind-hearted monarch one day gave
A rosy apple to his favourite slave,
Who seemed to eat the fruit with such delight
The laughing king said: “Here, give me a bite!”
The slave returned him half, but when the king
Bit into it it seemed a paltry thing,
Unripe and tart. Frowning he said: “And how
Is what appeared so sweet so bitter now?”
The slave replied: “My lord, you’ve given me
Such proofs of constant generosity,
I could not find it in my grateful heart
To grumble just because one apple’s tart –
I must accept whatever you bestow;
No harm can come to me from you, I know.”
If you meet tribulations here be sure
That wealth will come from all you must endure;
The paths of God are intricate and strange –
What can you do? Accept what will not change!
The wise know every mouthful on this Way
Tastes bitter with their blood. Until that day
When as His guests they break their bread, they must
Consume in suffering each broken crust.

One asked a sufi how he spent his time.
He said: “I’m thirsty, filthy, smeared with grime,
Burnt in this stove men call the world, but I
Shall keep my courage up until I die.”
If in this world you seek for happiness

You are asleep, your search is meaningless –
If you seek happiness you would do well
To think of that thin bridge arched over hell.*

lines 2455–72

The world's apparent joy cannot compare
With what we seek – it isn't worth a hair;
Here the Self rages like an unquenched fire,
And nothing satisfies the heart's desire –
Encompass all the earth, you will not find
One happy heart or one contented mind.

A woman who wished to pray for happiness

An old, sad woman talked to Mahna's sheikh:
"Teach me to pray for joy, for pity's sake –
I've suffered so much that I cannot bear
To think of future grief – give me some prayer
To murmur every day." The sheikh replied:
"How many years I wandered far and wide
Until I found the fortress that you seek
It is the knee, bend it, accept, be meek;
I found no other way – this remedy,
And only this, will cure your misery."

One sat before Junaid. "You are God's prey,"
He said, "yet you are free in every way
Tell me, when does a man know happiness?
When does his heart rejoice? I cannot guess."
Junaid replied: "That hour he finds the heart."
Unless we reach our king wç must depart –
With all our courage wasted – into night.
We atoms are amazed, and lack the light
Of the immortal sun; what circumstance,
'What suffering, could cleanse our ignorance?
An atom looked at from which way you will
Remains unalterably an atom still;
And one who has an atom's nature shows

That stubborn fact, no matter how he grows.
If he were lost within the blazing sun
He'd stay an atom till his life were done,
And, good or bad, no matter how he strains,

lines 2455–72

A tiny atom is what he remains.
O atom, weaving like a drunk until
You reach the sun – unsettled, never still –
My patience knows that one day you will see,
Beside the sun, your insufficiency.

The bat who wanted to see the sun

One night a bat said: "How is it that I
Have never seen the sun; I wonder why?
I long to lose myself inks pure light;
Instead my wretched life is one long night –
But though I travel with my eyes shut fast
I know I'll reach that promised blaze at last."
A seer had overheard and said: "What pride!
A thousand years might bring you to its side;
You are bewildered, lost you could as soon
Attain the sun as could an ant the moon."
The unpersuaded bat said: "Never mind,
I'll fly about and see what I can find."
For years he flew in dismal ignorance,
Till he collapsed in an exhausted trance
And murmured as he tried in vain to fly:
"Where is the sun? Perhaps I've passed it by?"
The seer was there and said: "You've managed one
Short step, and yet you think you've passed the sun;
You live in dreams!" Shame crushed the bat; he felt
The last thin remnants of his courage melt.
Humble and wretched, he sought out the Way–
"He understands," he said, "I will obey".'

A bird accepts the hoopoe's leadership

Another bird said: 'Hoopoe, you're our guide.
How would it be if I let you decide?
I'm ignorant of right and wrong – I'll wait

lines 2473–89

For any orders that you stipulate.
Whatever you command I'll gladly do,
Delighted to submit myself to you.'

'Bravo!' the hoopoe cried. 'By far the best
Decision is the one that you suggest;
Whoever will be guided finds relief
From Fate's adversity, from inward grief;
One hour of guidance benefits you more
Than all your mortal life, however pure.
Those who will not submit like lost dogs stray,
Beset by misery, and lose their way -.
How much a dog endures! and all in vain;
Without a guide his pain is simply pain.
But one who suffers and is guided gives
His merit to the world; he truly lives.
Take refuge in the orders of your guide,
And like a slave subdue your restive pride.

The king who stopped at the prison gates

A king returned once to his capital.
His subjects had prepared a festival,
And each to show his homage to the crown
Had helped to decorate the glittering town.
The prisoners had no wealth but iron gyves,
Chains, severed heads, racked limbs and ruined lives –
With such horrific ornaments they made
A sight to greet their monarch's cavalcade.
The king rode through the town and saw the way

His subjects solemnized the happy day,
But nothing stopped the progress of his train
Till he approached the prison and drew rein.
There he dismounted and had each man told
That he was free and would be paid in gold.
A courtier asked the king: “What does this mean?

lines 2490–2508

To think of all the pageantry you’ve seen –
Brocade and satin shining everywhere,
Musk and sweet ambergris to scent the air,
Jewels scattered by the handful on the ground –
And not so much as once did you look round;
Yet here you stop – before the prison gate!
Are severed heads a way to celebrate?
What is there here to give you such delight?
Torn limbs and carcasses? A grisly sight!
And why did you dismount? Should you sit down
With all the thieves and murderers in town?”
The king replied: “The others make a noise
Like rowdy children playing with new toys;
Each takes his part in some festivity,
Careful to please himself as much as me –
They do their duty and are quite content,
But here in prison more than duty’s meant.
My word is law here, and they’ve plainly shown
This spectacle was made for me alone.
I see obedience here; need I explain
Why it is here I’m happy to draw rein?
The others celebrate in pompous pride,
Conceited, giddy and self-satisfied,
But these poor captives sacrifice their will
And bow to my commands through good and ill –
They have no business but to spend each breath
In expectation of the noose and death,
Yet they submit – and to my grateful eyes
Their prison is a flower-strewn paradise.”
Wisdom accepts authority and waits;

The king paused only at the prison gates.

A sufi who surpassed Bayazid and Tarmazi

A master of the Way once said: “Last night
I saw a strange, unprecedented sight –
I dreamt that Bayazid and Tarmazi

lines 2509–30

Were walking, and they both gave way to me –
I was their guide! I sought to understand
How two such sheikhs were under my command,
And then remembered that one distant dawn
A sigh was from my very entrails torn;
That sigh had cleared the Way – a massive gate
Swung open, and I entered the debate
Of sheikhs and dervishes. All questioned me
But Bayazid, who was content to see
That I was there; he uttered no request
But said: ‘I heard the sigh that tore your breast,
And knew I must accept you as you are,
Not seek for this or that particular –
Embrace the soul and disregard the pain,
Or weigh up what is loss and what is gain;
Your wish is my command, for who am I
To question those commands or to reply?
Your faithful slave cannot demur or tire;
I will perform whatever you desire.’
This shows why Bayazid and Tarmazi,
Though they are great, gave precedence to me.”
When once a slave accepts his Lord’s control
And hears Him whisper in his inmost soul
He does not boast, no outward signs are shown,
But when life’s crises come – then he is known.

The death of Sheikh Kherghan

When Sheikh Kherghan lay near to death he cried:
“If men could split my heart and see inside,
They’d tell the world my misery and pain,
A wise man’s secret doctrine would be plain:
Forsake idolatry; if you do this
You are His slave, and cannot go amiss;
All else is pride. If you are neither slave
Nor God you’re substanceless, however brave –
I call you ‘No-one’; turn now, no-one, seek

lines 2531–44

Devotion’s path, be humbled, lowly, meek.
But when you bow the head in slavery,
Be resolute, bow down with dignity:
The king who sees a cringing, stupid slave
Who has no notion how he should behave
Expels him from his court, and Mecca’s shrine
Is closed to louts and fools. If you combine
True servitude with dignity your Lord
Will not deny you your desired reward.”

The slave who was given a splendid robe

A slave was given, from his sovereign’s hand,
A splendid robe – and feeling very grand
He put it on to wander through the town.
By chance, as he paraded up and down,
Some mud splashed in his face, and with his sleeve
He quickly wiped it off: who should perceive
His action but a sneaking sycophant –
The king was told and hanged the miscreant.
From this unhappy story you can see
How kings treat those who have no dignity.’

A bird questions the hoopoe about purity

Another bird spoke next: ‘Dear hoopoe, say
What purity consists of on this Way,
It seems a settled heart’s forbidden me –
All that I gain I lose immediately.
It’s either scattered to the winds or turns
To scorpions in my hands; my being yearns
For this great quest, I’m bound to nothing here –
I smashed all worldly chains and knew no fear;
With purity of heart, who knows, I might
Behold His face with my unaided sight.’

lines 2545–61

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: ‘Our Way does not belong
To anyone, but to the pure and strong –
To those who let go every interest
And give themselves entirely to our quest;
All your possessions are not worth a hair.
(Don’t mend what’s torn, what’s sewn together tear!)
Consign them to the fire, and when its flash
Has burnt them, rake together all the ash
And sit on it – then you will know their worth.
But you will curse the day that gave you birth
If you ignore my words. Until your heart
Is free of ownership you cannot start –
Since we must leave this prison and its pains,
Detach yourself from all that it contains;
Will what you own bribe death? Will death delay?
If you would enter on the pilgrim’s Way,
Tie up your grasping hands: all you endure
Is valueless if you set out impure.

A sheikh of Turkestan once said: “Above
All other things there are just two I love.
My swiftly trotting piebald horse is one –
The second is none other than my son
If death should take my son I’d sacrifice

My horse in thanks – I know these two entice,
As idols would, my spirit from the Way."
Don't brag of purity until the day
You flare as candles do whose substance turns
To nothing as the flame leaps up and burns;
Whoever boasts a pure, unsullied name
Will find his actions contradict his claim,
When purity gives way to greed, the power
Of retribution strikes within the hour.

lines 2562–80

Sheikh Kherghani and the aubergine

One day Sheikh Kherghani's devout routine
Was spoilt by cravings for an aubergine.
His mother was unsure what should be done
But hesitantly gave him half a one –
The moment that he bit its flesh a crew
Of ruffians seized his son and ran him through.
That night, outside the sheikh's front door they laid
His boy's head hacked off by a cutlass blade.
The sheikh cried out: "How often I'd foreseen
Disaster if I tasted aubergine!"
The man who has been chosen by this Guide
Must follow Him and never swerve aside –
His service is more terrible than war,
Than shame that cringes to a conqueror.
It is not knowledge keeps a man secure –
With all his understanding, fate is sure;
Each moment we receive a different guest,
And each that comes presents another test,
Although a hundred sorrows wring your soul,
The future will not bow to your control.
But one who breaks illusion's hold will find
Misfortune will not always cloud his mind.
A hundred thousand of His lovers sigh
To sacrifice themselves for Him and die;
How many waste their idle lives until

They bleed and groan, subservient to His will.

A voice speaks to Zulnoon

Zulnoon said: “I was in the desert once.
Trusting in God, I’d brought no sustenance –
I came on forty men ahead of me,
Dressed all in rags, a closed community.
My heart was moved. ‘O God,’ I cried, ‘take heed,
What wretched lives you make your pilgrims lead!’

lines 2581–98

‘We know their life and death,’ a voice replied;
‘We kill these pilgrims first; when they have died
We compensate them for the blood we shed.’
I asked, ‘When will this killing stop?’ He said:
‘When my exchequer has no love* to give,
While I can pay for death they shall not live,
I drink my servant’s blood and he is hurled
In frenzied turbulence about the world –
Then when he is destroyed and cannot find
His head, his feet, his passions or his mind,
I clothe him in the splendour he has won
And grace enfolds him, radiant as the sun:
Though I will have his face bedaubed by blood,
A starved ascetic smeared with dust and mud,
A denizen of shadows and the night –
Yet I will rise before him robed in light,
And when that sun, My countenance, is here
What can these shadows do but disappear?’”
Shadows are swallowed by the sun, and he
Who’s lost in God is from himself set free;
Don’t chatter about loss – be lost Repent,
And give up vain, self-centred argument;
If one can lose the Self, in all the earth
No other being can approach his worth.

I know of no one in the world profound

As Pharaoh's sorcerers: the wealth they found
Was faith's true Way, which is to sift apart
The grosser Self from the aspiring heart.
The world's known nothing of them since that day
They took this first short step along the Way –
And in the world no wisdom could provide
A surer path than this, a better guide!'

lines 2599–2612

A bird who burns with aspiration

‘O hoopoe,’ cried another of the birds,
‘What lofty ardour blazes from your words!
Although I seem despondent, weak and lame,
I burn with aspiration’s noble flame –
And though I’m not obedient I feel
My soul devoured by an insatiate zeal.’

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: ‘This strange, magnetic force
That holds God’s ancient lovers to their course
Still shows the Truth: if you will but aspire
You will attain to all that you desire.
Before an atom of such need the sun
Seems dim and murky by comparison –
It is life’s strength, the wings by which we fly
Beyond the further reaches of the sky.

The old woman who wanted to buy Joseph

When Joseph was for sale, the marketplace
Teemed with Egyptians wild to see his face;
So many gathered there from dawn to dusk
The asking price was five whole tubs of musk.
An ancient crone pushed forward in her hand
She held a few threads twisted strand by strand;
She brandished them and yelled with all her might:
“Hey, you, the seller of the Canaanite!
I’m mad with longing for this lovely child –

I've spun these threads for him, he drives me wild!
You take the threads and I'll take him away –
Don't argue now, I haven't got all day!"
The merchant laughed and said: "Come on, old girl,
It's not for you to purchase such a pearl

lines 2613–29

His value's reckoned up in gold and jewels;
He can't be sold for threads to ancient fools!"
"O, I knew that before," the old crone said;
"1 knew you wouldn't sell him for my thread
But it's enough that everyone will ay
'She bid for Joseph on that splendid day'."
The heart that does not strive can never gain
The endless kingdom's gates and lives in vain;
It was pure aspiration made a king
Set fire to all he owned to everything
And when his goods had vanished without trace
A thousand kingdoms sprang up in their place.
When noble aspiration seized his mind,
He left the world's corrupted wealth behind –
Can one who craves the sun be satisfied
With petty ignorance? Is this his guide?

The poverty of Ibrahim Adham

I know of one who whined unceasingly,
Complaining of his abject poverty,
Till Ibrahim Adham said: "Do you weep
Because you bought your poverty too cheap?"
The man replied: "What's that supposed to mean?
To purchase poverty would be obscene."
He said: "I gave a kingdom up for mine,
But for the earthly realm which I resign
I still receive, each moment that I live,
A hundred worlds: my realm was fugitive –
I said farewell to it, to all the earth,
And put my trust in goods of proven worth.

I know what value is; I praise His name –
And you know neither, to your lasting shame."
Those who aspire renounce both heart and soul,
Content through years to suffer for their goal;
The bird of aspiration seeks His throne,
Outsoaring faith and all the world, alone:

lines 2630–46

But if you lack this zeal, be off with you –
You're quite unfit for all we have to do.

Sheikh Ghouri and Prince Sanjar

When Sheikh Ghouri, an adept of the Way,
Took refuge underneath a bridge one day
Together with a group of crazy fools,
Sanjar rode by, resplendent in his jewels,
And said: "Who's huddled over there?" "O king,"
The sheikh replied, "we haven't got a thing,
But we've decided on a choice for you –
Be good to us, and bid the world adieu,
Or be our enemy, and you will find
It is your faith that you must leave behind.
If you will join us for a moment here,
Your pride and gorgeous pomp will disappear –
Look at our friendship and our enmity
And make your mind up; which is it to be?"
Sanjar replied: "I'm not the man for you.
It's not your kind my hate and love pursue;
You're not my enemy, you're not my friend;
My heart's directed to a different end.
In front of you I've neither pride nor shame
And have no business with your praise or blame."
The bird of aspiration spreads its wings
And quickly soars beyond terrestrial things –
Beyond the lower world's complacent guess
Of what is temperance, what drunkenness.

The feathers of the soul

One night a fool of God wept bitterly
And said: “The world, as far as I can see,
Is like a box, and we are locked inside,
Lost in the darkness of our sin and pride;
When death removes the lid we fly away –

lines 2647–60

If we have feathers – to eternal day,
But those who have no feathers must stay here,
Tormented in this box by pain and fear.”
Give wings to aspiration; love the mind;
And if at death you’d leave this box behind,
Grow wings and feathers for the soul; if not,
Burn all your hopes, for you will die and rot.’

A bird questions the hoopoe about justice and loyalty

Another bird said: ‘What are loyalty
And justice, put beside such majesty?
God gave me boundless loyalty and I’ve
Not been unjust to any man alive –
What is the ghostly rank of those who own
Such qualities, before our sovereign’s throne?’

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: ‘Salvation’s Lord is just,
And justice raises man above the dust;
To live with justice in your heart exceeds
A lifetime’s earnest prayer and pious deeds;
And tales of lavish generosity
Are less than one just act done secretly
(Though justice given in a public place
Suggests deceit beneath the smiling face).

The just man does not argue for his rights;
It is for others that he stands and fights.

Ahmad Hanbal and the beggar

Ahmad Hanbal, a man renowned and wise,
Whose knowledge no one dared to criticize,
Would when he felt his mind inadequate
Consult a barefoot beggar at his gate.

lines 2661–80

If anyone discovered him they'd say:
"But you're our wisest man in every way;
When one of us is called upon to speak
You scarcely hear our words – yet here you seek
A barefoot beggar out; what can it mean?"
Ahmad Hanbal replied: "As you have seen,
My commentaries have carried off the prize;
In matters of *hadith** and law I'm wise –
I know more worldly things than him, it's true,
But he knows God – much more than I can do."
Look at this action well before you claim
A justice that does not deserve the name.

An Indian king

As Mahmoud's army moved through India,
They chanced to take an old king prisoner
Who learnt the Moslem faith at Mahmoud's court
And counted this world and the next as nought.
Alone, a hermit in a ragged tent,
He lived for prayer, an earnest penitent,
His face bathed day and night in scalding tears –
At last the news of this reached Mahmoud's ears.
He summoned him and said: "I'll give to you
A hundred kingdoms and their revenue;
It's not for you to weep, you are a king;

I promise to return you everything!”
To this the Indian king replied: “My lord,
It’s not my kingdom conquered by your sword
That makes me weep, but thoughts of Judgement Day;
For at the resurrection God will say
‘O faithless wretch, you had no thoughts of Me
Till you were crushed by Mahmoud’s cavalry –
It took an army’s might to change your mind,

lines 2681–89

And till you stood defenceless you were blind –
Does this make you My friend or enemy?
How long did I treat you with loyalty
And in return endure your than Me hate?
Is this the friendship that you advocate?’
If Cod says this, what answer can I give
To contradict the damning narrative?
Young man, if you could understand my fears
You’d know the reason for an old man’s tears.”
Learn from these faithful words, and if your heart
Holds faith like this, prepare now to depart;
But if your heart is faithless, give up now,
Forget our struggle and renounce your vow;
The faithless have no place on any page
Within the volume of our pilgrimage.

The faithless Moslem and the faithful infidel

A Moslem fought an infidel one day
And as they fought requested time to pray.
He prayed and fought again – the infidel
Then asked for time to say his prayers as well;
He went aside to find a cleaner place
And there before his idol bowed his face.
The Moslem, when he saw him kneel and bow,
Said: “Victory is mine if I strike now.”
But as he raised his sword for that last stroke,
A warning voice from highest heaven spoke:

“O vicious wretch – from head to foot deceit –
What promises are these, you faithless cheat?
His blade was sheathed when you asked him for time;
For you to strike him now would be a crime –
Have you not read in Our Koran the verse
‘Fulfil your promises’? And will you curse
The word you gave? The infidel was true;
He kept his promises, and so should you.
You offer evil in return for good –

lines 2699–2715

With others act as to yourself you would!
The infidel kept faith with you, and where
Is your fidelity, for all your prayer?
You are a Moslem, but false piety
Is less than this poor pagan’s loyalty.”
The Moslem heard this speech and went apart;
Sweat poured from him, remorse accused his heart.
The pagan saw him as if spell-bound stand,
Tears in his eyes, his sword still in his hand,
And asked: “Why do you weep?” The man replied:
“My shame is not a matter I can hide” –
He told him of the voice that he had heard
Reproaching him when he would break his word,
And ending said: “My tears anticipate
The fury of your vengeance and your hate.”
But when the infidel had heard this tale,
His eyes were filled with tears, his face turned pale –
“God censures you for your disloyalty
And guards the life of His sworn enemy –
Can I continue to be faithless now?
I’ll burn my gods, to Allah I will bow,
Expound His law! Too long my heart has lain
In darkness bound by superstition’s chain.”
What infidelity you give for love!
But I shall wait until the heavens above
Confront you with the actions you have done
And number them before you, one by one.

Joseph and his brothers

Ten starving brothers left their home to stand
In Joseph's presence, in a foreign land,
And begged for some benevolent relief
To ease the torments of their wretched grief.
Now Joseph's face was veiled; he took a bowl
And struck it hard – a sound as if a soul
Cried out in misery was heard. He said:

lines 2716–42

"Do you know what this means?" Each shook his head.
"Lord, no one in the world, search far and wide,
Could give this noise a meaning," they replied.
Then Joseph said: "It speaks to you; it says
You had a brother once, in former days,
More precious than this bowl – he bore the name
Of Joseph; and it says that, to your shame,
His goodness overshadowed all of you."
Once more he struck the bowl. "It says you threw
This Joseph in a well, then stained his cloak
With wolf's blood; and it says the smeared rags broke
Poor Jacob's heart." He touched the bowl again:
"It says you brought your father needless pain
And sold the lovely Joseph. Is this true?
May God bestow remorse to chasten you!"
These brothers who had come to beg for bread
Stood speechless, faint with apprehensive dread:
When they gave Joseph for the merchant's gold,
It was themselves, and all the world, they sold –
And when they threw their brother in that well,
They threw themselves in the abyss of hell.
Whoever hears these words and cannot find
How they apply to him is truly blind.
There is no need to scrutinize my tale,
It is your own; when thoughtlessly you fail
To render loyalty its proper due,
How can the light of friendship shine for you?
But, till you're woken, sleep – too soon you'll see

Your shameful crimes, your infidelity,
And when you stand a prisoner in that place
They'll count them one by one before your face;
There, when the bowl is struck, you too will find
That fear dissolves your reason and your mind.
You're like a lame ant struggling for its soul,
Aimlessly sliding, caught inside this bowl –
Blood fills it, but a voice beyond its rim
Still calls to you – rise now, and fly to Him.'

lines 2743–58

A bird questions the hoopoe about audacity

Another bird said: 'Is audacity
Allowable before such majesty?
One needs audacity to conquer fear –
But is it right in His exalted sphere?'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'Those who are worthy reach
A subtle understanding none can teach;
They guard the secrets of our glorious king
And therefore are not kept from anything –
But how could one who knows such secrets be
Convicted of the least audacity?
Since he is filled with reverence to the brim,
A breath of boldness is permitted him.
(The ignorant, it's true, can never share
The secrets of our king. If one should dare
To ape the ways of the initiate,
What does he do but blindly imitate?
He's like some soldier who kicks up a din
And spoils the ranks with his indiscipline.)
But think of some new pilgrim, some young boy,

Whose boldness comes from mere excess of joy;
He has no certain knowledge of the Way
And what seems rudeness is but loving play –
He's like a madman – love's audacity
Will have him walking on the restless sea.
Such ways are laudable; we should admire
This love that turns him to a blazing fire;
One can't expect discretion from a flame,
And madmen are beyond reproach or blame
When madness chooses you to be its prey
We'll hear what crazy things you have to say.

lines 2759–76

The dervish who envied a king's slaves
Once Khorasan enjoyed great affluence
Beneath a prince of proved benevolence –
His slaves were lovely as the moon at dusk,
Straight-limbed and silver, scented with soft musk,
And in their ears shone pearls whose milky light
Reflected daytime in the darkest night.
Gold ornaments half hid and half revealed
Their silver limbs; each held a golden shield.
Bright gems adorned their belts; a white horse bore
Each slave as if he were a conqueror.
Whoever saw this shining army gave
His heart to them, the slaves' contented slave.
A barefoot, hungry dervish once, by chance,
Caught sight of this unique magnificence,
And wondering asked: "What houris might these be?"
The crowd exclaimed: "The splendid troop you see
Are slaves belonging to our noble lord."
The dervish writhed as if in pain, then roared:
"Great God, look down from your exalted sphere –
Learn how to treat your slaves from this man here!"
If you are mad like him, if you possess
Such leaves of Truth, forget all bashfulness,
Be bold! But if these leaves are not your style,
Control yourself, and wipe away your smile.

Boldness like this does not deserve our blame;
Such men are moths, ambitious for the flame –
They only see their goal and cannot say
What's good or bad along the pilgrims' Way.

A madman seeks shelter

A naked madman, gnawed by hunger, went
Along the road – his shivering frame was bent
Beneath the icy sleet; no house stood there
To offer shelter from the wintry air.

lines 2777–93

He saw a ruined hut and with a dash
Stood underneath its roof; a sudden crash
Rang out – a tile had fallen on his head,
And how the gaping gash it cut there bled!
He looked up at the sky and yelled: "Enough!
Why can't you clobber me with better stuff?"

The poor man, the rich man and the ass

A poor man living in a drainage-ditch
Once borrowed from his neighbour (who was rich)
A valued ass, and rode it to the mill.
He slept there, and the ass made off at will –
A wolf devoured the beast; with indignation
The owner made a claim for compensation.
The poor man and his neighbour went to court,
Submitting an exhaustive, full report –
"Now who should pay?" they asked. The judge replied:
"Whoever* lets this wolf hunt far and wide,
Whoever put him here to roam about,
Should compensate you both without a doubt –
O God, who is the debtor, who can say?
It's certain that no mortal ought to pay."
As Egypt's noble maidens swooned to see

Dear Joseph's radiant face, so ecstasy
Is mirrored in the sufi's maddened heart –
Then he has lost himself and moves apart
From all that we perceive – the world grows dim
As all the world resolves to follow him.

A famine in Egypt

In Egypt once a baleful famine spread –

The people perished as they begged for bread.
Death filled the roads; the living gnawed the dead.

lines 2794–2811

A crazy dervish saw their wretched plight
And cried: "O God, look down from Your great height –
If there's no food for them, make fewer men!"
A man who speaks like this asks pardon when
He comes back to himself – if he's to blame
He knows the ways to cancel all his shame.

A dervish deceived by a hailstorm

A dervish suffered bruises and sore bones
From children who continually threw stones.
He found a ruined hut and in he stole,
Not noticing its roof contained a hole.
A hailstorm started – through the leaky shed
The hail came bouncing on the old man's head.
The hail was stones for all that he could tell –
He lost his temper and began to yell.
Convinced that they were throwing stones once more,
He screamed out filthy names, fumed, stamped and swore –

Then thought: “This dark’s so thick it’s possible
It’s not the children this time after all.”
A door blew open and revealed the hail;
He saw his error and began to wail:
“The darkness tricked me, God – and on my head
Be all the foolish, filthy names I said.”
If crazy dervishes behave like this
It’s not for you to take their words amiss;
If they seem drunk to you, control your scorn –
Their lives are painful, savage and forlorn;
They must endure a lifetime’s hopelessness
And every moment brings some new distress –
Don’t meddle with their conduct; don’t reprove
Those given up to madness and to love.
You would excuse them – nothing is more sure –
If you could share the darkness they endure.

lines 2812–28

AlVasati passes the Jewish cemetery

AlVasati, cast down by grief one day,
Proceeded on his troubled, weary way
Until he saw the Jewish cemetery
And said: “These souls are pardoned and go free;
But this is not a truth that can be taught. “
His words were heard and he was haled to court,
Where angry judges asked him what he meant –
AlVasati replied: “Your government
Accuses them; their pardon’s heaven-sent”.’

A bird claims that he lives only for the Simorgh

Another bird spoke up: ‘I live for love,
For Him and for the glorious world above –
For Him I’ve cut myself from everything;
My life’s one song of love to our great king.

I've seen the world's inhabitants, and know
I could not worship any here below;
My ardent love's for Him alone; how few
Can manage to adore Him as I do!
But though I've struggled on with all my soul,
It seems I haven't quite achieved our goal.
The time has come – my Self will disappear;
I'll drink the wine of meekness and draw near;
His beauty will illuminate my heart;
His neck will know my touch; we shall not part. '
The hoopoe answers him
The hoopoe said: 'The Simorgh isn't won
By boasts of who you are and what you've done –
Don't brag of love; He's not deceived by lies,
And no one pulls the wool across his eyes.
His call is like some lightly wafted breeze

lines 2829–50

Lifting the veil from hidden mysteries –
Then He will draw you to Himself, alone;
Your place will be with Him, beside His throne
(Though if mere pride of place prompts your desire,
Your love prepares you for eternal fire).

Bayazid after death

When Bayazid had left the world behind,
He came that night before the dreaming mind
Of one of his disciples, who in fear
Asked how he'd fared with Monkar and Nakir.*
He said: "When those two angels questioned me
About the Lord, I told them I could see
No profit in our talk – if I should say
'He is my God', my answer would betray
A proud, ambitious heart; they should return
To God and ask him what they wished to learn –
God says who is His slave; the slave is dumb,
Waiting for Him to say: 'Good servant, come!'"

If grace is given you from God above,
Then you are wholly worthy of His love;
And if He kindles joy in you, the fire
Will burst out and its flames beat ever higher –
It is His works that act, not yours, you fool;
When will these dunces understand His rule!

A dervish in love with God

A dervish wept to feel the violence of
The inextinguishable fires of love.
His spirit melted, and his soul became
A seething mass of incandescent flame;
He wept as he proceeded on his way,

lines 2851–67

And through his scalding tears was heard to say:
"For how much longer must I weep?
Desire Has burnt my life in its consuming fire."
"What's all this boasting for?" a voice replied,
"Can you approach Him with such senseless pride?"
"And when did I approach Him?" asked the saint;
"No, He approaches me; that's my complaint –
How could a wretched thing like me pretend
To have the worth to claim Him as my friends?
Look – I do nothing; He performs all deeds
And He endures the pain when my heart bleeds."
When He draws near and grants you audience
Should you hang back in tongue-tied diffidence?
When will your cautious heart consent to go
Beyond the homely boundaries you know?
O slave, if He should show His love to you,
Love which His deeds perpetually renew,
You will be nothing, you will disappear –
Leave all to Him who acts, and have no fear.
If there is any "you", if any wraith
Of Self persists, you've strayed outside our faith.

Shah Mahmoud and the stoker at the public baths

Shah Mahmoud, full of sorrow, went one night
To one who keeps the baths' huge fires alight;
The man made room among the ash and grime
(Feeding the furnace-mouth from time to time),
Then brought the king some stale, unwholesome bread.
"When he knows who I am," Shah Mahmoud said,
"He'll beg to be allowed to keep his head!"
When, finally, the king prepared to go,
The poor man said: "I haven't much to show –
You've seen my home and food (I brought the best;
You were a rather unexpected guest),
But if in future you feel sorrow's pain
I hope you'll come and be my guest again.

lines 2868–86

If you weren't king you could be happy, sire;
I'm happy shovelling wood on this great fire –
So I'm not less than you or more, you see
I'm nothing next to you, your majesty."
The king was so impressed that he returned,
And seven times saw how that furnace burned –
At last he said: "Stop stoking this great fire
And ask from me whatever you require."
"1 am a beggar, lord," the man replied;
"And with a king all needs are satisfied."
Shah Mahmoud said: "Speak up, ask anything –
You can forget the furnace and be king!"
He said: "My hope is this, that now and then
My king will visit me in this dark den
The dust he treads on is a crown to me;
His presence here will be my monarchy.
Yours is the kingdom and the hand that gives,
But that's not how a bath attendant lives.
Better to sit with you in this foul place
Than reign in state and never see your face.
This spot has brought me luck, and I'd be wrong
To leave the furnace-mouth where I belong –

Besides, it's here I made friends with my king,
I wouldn't give this up for anything –
When you are here the bath-house shines anew;
What more could I desire from you than you?
May my perverse heart die if it should crave
Another fate than to remain your slave
What's sovereignty to me? All I request
Is that from time to time you'll be my guest."
The bath attendant's love should teach you yours;
Learn from him all the loving heart endures –
And if this love has stirred in you, then cling
With passion to the garments of your king;
He too is moved; hold fast and do not stop –
He is a sea; He asks of you one drop.

lines 2887–2902

Two water-sellers

A man who lived by selling water found
He'd very little left; he looked around
And saw another water-seller there –
"Have you got any water you could spare?"
He asked. "No, fool, I certainly have not,"
The other snapped; "make do with what you've got!"
"O, give me some," the man began to plead;
"I'm sick of what I have; it's yours I need."
When Adam's heart grew tired of all he knew,
He yearned for wheat, a substance strange and new –
He gave up all he owned for one small grain,
And naked suffered love's relentless pain;
He disappeared in love's intensity –
The old and new were gone and so was he;
He was annihilated, lost, made naught –
Nothingness swallowed all his hands had sought.
To turn from what we are, to yearn and die
Is not for us to choose or to deny.'

A bird who claims to be satisfied with his spiritual state

Another bird squawked: 'There can be no doubt
I've made myself unworldly and devout.
To reach this wise perfection which you see
I've lived a life of cruel austerity,
And as I've gained the sum of wisdom here,
I really couldn't move, I hope that's clear.
What fool would leave his treasury to roam
In deserts and dry mountains far from home?'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'Hell's pride has filled your soul;
Lost in self-love, you dread our distant goal.
Your arrogance deceives you, and you stray
Further and further from the spirit's Way.

lines 2908–19

Your Self has trapped your soul and made it blind;
The devil's throne is your complacent mind.
The light that guides you is a fantasy,
Your love a self-induced absurdity –
All your austerities are just a cheat,
And all you say is nothing but deceit.
Don't trust the light which shows you where you go;
Your own Self sheds this dim, misleading glow –
It has no sword, but such an enemy
Will threaten any man's security.
If it's your Self's light which the road reveals,
It's like the scorpion's sting which parsley heals;
Don't be deceived by this false glow, but run
And be an atom since you're not the sun
(Don't grieve because the Way is dark as night,
Or strive to emulate the sun's pure light);
Whilst you are locked within yourself your cares
Are worthless as your worthless cries and prayers.
If you would soar beyond the circling sky,

First free yourself from thoughts of “me” and “I”;
If any thought of selfhood stains your mind
An empty void is all the Self will find,
If any taste of selfhood stays with you
Then you are damned whatever you may do.
If selfhood beckons you for but one breath
A rain of arrows will decide your death.
While you exist endure the spirit’s pain;
A hundred times bow down, then bow again –
But if you cling to selfhood and its crimes,
Your neck will feel Fate’s yoke a hundred times.

How Sheikh Abou Bakr’s self-satisfaction was reproved

Sheikh Abou Bakr of Neishapour one day
Led his disciples through a weary way.
His donkey carried him, aloof, apart –
And then the beast let out a monstrous fart!

lines 2920–41

The sheikh began to tear his clothes and cry
Till one of his disciples asked him why.
The sheikh said: “When I looked I saw a sea
Of my disciples sworn to follow me;
They filled the roads and in my mind there slid
The thought: ‘By God, I equal Bayazid!
So many praise me, can I doubt this sign
That heaven’s boundless glories will be mine?’
Then as I triumphed in my inmost heart,
My donkey answered me – and with a fart;
My pompous, self-deceiving soul awoke,
And this is why I weep and tear my cloak.”
How far away the truth remains while you
Are lost in praise for all you say and do –
Destroy your arrogance, and feed the fire
With that vain Self you foolishly admire.
You change your face each moment, but deep down
You are a Pharaoh and you wear his crown,

Whilst one small atom of this “you” survives
Hypocrisy enjoys a hundred lives.
If you put all your trust in “I” and “me”
You’ve chosen both worlds as your enemy –
But if you kill the Self, the darkest night
Will be illuminated with your light.
If you would flee from evil and its pain
Swear never to repeat this “I” again!

The devil’s secret

God said to Moses once: “Go out and find
The secret truth that haunts the devil’s mind.”
When Moses met the devil that same day
He asked for his advice and heard him say:
“Remember this, repeat it constantly,
Don’t speak of ‘me’, or you will be like me.”
If life still holds you by a single hair,
The end of all your toil will be despair;

lines 2942–58

No matter how you prosper, there will rise
Before your face a hundred smirking “I”s.

A saint once said: “The novice ought to see
A door that opens on obscurity –
Then seas of love will inundate his mind,
And he will leave our earthly life behind;
If he sees anything but darkness there,
He is deceived and worships empty air.”
Though others see them, you have not the art
To recognize the passions in your heart.
There is a den in you where dragons thrive;
Your folly keeps the prowling beasts alive –
By day and night you watch them sleep and eat
And cosset them, and toss them blood-soaked meat.
From dust and blood your earthly being grew –

Is it not strange that both should be taboo?
That blood, which flows within your every vein,
Is an impurity, an unclean stain?
What you most love defiles, and deep within
The chambers of your heart hide guilt and sin;
If you have seen this filth, why do you sit
Smiling as if you'd never heard of it?

The sheikh and the dog

A dog brushed up against a sheikh, who made
No move to draw his skirts in or evade
The filthy stray – a puzzled passer-by
Who'd noticed his behaviour asked him why.
He said: "The dog is filthy, as you see,
But what is outside him is inside me
What's clear on him is hidden in my heart;
Why should such close companions stay apart?"
If inward filth is slight or if it's great,
The outcome is the same disgusting state –

lines 2959–74

If straws impede you, or a mountain-top,
Where is the difference if you have to stop?

The anchorite who loved his beard

In Moses' time there lived an anchorite
Who prayed incessantly by day and night,
And yet derived no pleasure from his quest;
No sun had risen in his troubled breast.
He had a beard, of which he took great care,
Loving to comb it hair by silky hair.
It happened that this pious man one day
Caught sight of Moses walking far away –
He ran to him and cried: "Mount Sinai's lord,
Ask God why he denies me my reward,"

When next on Sinai's slopes good Moses trod,
He put this poor man's question to his God,
Who answered: "Tell this would-be saint that he
Pays more attention to his beard than Me."
When Moses told the man of God's reply,
He tore his beard out with a piteous cry –
Then Gabriel appeared to them and said:
"Concern for that grey beard still fills his head;
He loved it then, and now he pulls it out,
His wretched love is even more devout."
Whatever stage you've reached, to spend one breath
Unmindful of your God is worse than death –
And what of you, still wrapped up in your beard,
For whom grief's ocean has not yet appeared?
Forget this beard and you will understand
How you can swim across and gain dry land –
But keep it as you enter that profound
Ungoverned sea, and with it you'll be drowned.

A drowning fool

A fool with an enormous beard once fell
Into a violent sea's tumultuous swell.

lines 2975–96

As he was struggling he heard someone shout:
"That bag tied on your collar – throw it out!"
"It's not a bag, it's my huge beard!" he cried.
"Well, that's just marvellous," the man replied,
"A splendid growth; but now the harvest's come."
Your goatish beards have made you quarrelsome,
Self-willed and vain, the devil's followers,
Strutting like Pharaoh and his ministers.
But beard this Pharaoh, as did Moses once,
And set out on the Way with confidence –
The pilgrim has no time to preen and comb;
Long suffering will attend his journey home.
If bleaching's his profession he'll complain

There is no sun – if crops, there is no rain.

A sufi washing his clothes

Once, as a sufi washed his clothes, a cloud
Filled all the heavens like a darkening shroud –
But though the world seemed plunged in deepest night,
The sufi's clothes shone clean and strangely bright.
He'd been about to find a grocer's stall
To buy some soap – "I don't need soap at all,"
He told himself, and then he said aloud:
"I'll buy some raisins, thanks to you, O cloud –
You do far more than grocer's powders could,
I've washed my hands of earthly soap for good !" '

A bird asks for help and advice

Another bird spoke next: 'Dear hoopoe, say
What will sustain my heart along the Way –
To travel as I should I need your aid;
If you can help me I'll be less afraid –
To make me start this quest, then persevere,
I must be told how I can conquer fear.

lines 2997–3012

I spurn the crowd's advice; I'm quite alone
And haven't any wisdom of my own.'

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: 'Trust Him, and while you live,
Avoid whoever seems too talkative.
With Him you will rejoice – when He is there
The saddest soul is freed from every care;
There is no sorrow He cannot console –

On Him depends the sky's revolving bowl.
Let His joy teach you yours, as planets move
Within the orbit of sustaining love;
What is His equal? Say that nothing is,
Then happiness is yours, and you are His.

A dervish in ecstasy

A frenzied dervish, mad with love for God,
Sought out bare hills where none had ever trod.
Wild leopards kept this madman company –
His heart was plunged in restless ecstasy;
He lived within this state for twenty days,
Dancing and singing in exultant praise:
"There's no division; we two are alone
The world is happiness and grief has flown."
Die to yourself – no longer stay apart,
But give to Him who asks for it your heart;
The man whose happiness derives from Him
Escapes existence, and the world grows dim;
Rejoice for ever in the Friend, rejoice
Till you are nothing, but a praising voice.

"For seventy years my happy heart has led
A life of constant bliss," a sufi said.
"My God has been so good to me that I

lines 3013–38

Am bound to Him until the day I die."
You seek for faults to censure and suppress
And have no time for inward happiness –
How can you know God's secret majesty
If you look out for sin incessantly?
To share His hidden glory you must learn
That others' errors are not your concern –
When someone else's failings are denned
What hairs you split – but to your own you're blind!

Grace comes to those, no matter how they've strayed,
Who know their own sin's strength, and are afraid.

A drunkard accuses a drunkard

A sot became extremely drunk – his legs
And head sank listless, weighed by wine's thick dregs.
A sober neighbour put him in a sack
And took him homewards hoisted on his back.
Another drunk went stumbling by the first,
Who woke and stuck his head outside and cursed.
"Hey, you, you lousy dipsomaniac,"
He yelled as he was borne off in the sack,
"If you'd had fewer drinks, just two or three,
You would be walking now as well as me."
He saw the other's state but not his own,
And in this blindness he is not alone;
You cannot love, and this is why you seek
To find men vicious, or depraved, or weak –
If you could search for love and persevere
The sins of other men would disappear.

The lover who saw a blemish in his beloved's eye

A lion-hearted hero met defeat –
Five years he loved, and slavery was sweet.
The girl for whom he was content to sigh

lines 3029–46

Had one small blemish lurking in her eye,
And though, as often as she would permit,
He gazed at her he never noticed it.
(How could a man possessed by frenzy see
This unimportant, faint deformity?)
Then imperceptibly love ceased to reign;
A balm was found to ease his aching pain –
The girl and all her blandishments

Became a matter of indifference;
And now the blemish in her eye was clear –
He asked her: “When did that white speck appear?”
She answered: “As your love began to die,
This speck was brought to being in my eye. “
How long will others’ faults distract your mind?
Your own accuse you, but your heart is blind.
Your sins are heavy, and while they are there,
Another’s guilt is none of your affair.

The drunk and the constable

Aman whose job it was to keep the peace
Beat up a drunk, who fought for his release
And cried: “It’s you who’s tippled too much wine;
Your rowdiness is ten times worse than mine –
Who’s causing this disturbance, you or me?
But yours is drunkenness that men can’t see;
Leave me alone! Let justice do its worst –
Enforce the law and beat yourself up first!”

A bird wonders what gift he should ask for from the Simorgh

Another bird said: ‘Leader of my soul,
What shall I ask for if I reach our goal?
His light will fill the world, but I’m not sure
What special gift I should be looking for –
I’ll ask Him for whatever you suggest.’

lines 3047–64

The hoopoe answers him

The hoopoe said: ‘Poor fool, make one request;
Seek only Him – of all things He is best;
If you’re aware of Him, in all the earth
What could you wish for of a greater worth?

Whoever joins Him in that secret place
Is step by step admitted to His grace –
No bribe can turn aside the penitent
Who knows the fragrance of His threshold's scent.

The death of Bou Ali Roudbar

When Bou Ali Roudbar drew near to death,
He said: "Impatience hastens my last breath.
I see the gates of heaven part and rise;
A throne of glory shines before my eyes –
Angelic voices fill the glistening dome;
Like nightingales they call my ardour home.
'Rejoice!' they sing, 'no man has ever known
This radiant splendour which is yours alone.'
Though I believe in this refulgent state,
It's not for this my soul and spirit wait;
They murmur to me: 'What is this to you?
Was it for this you bid the world adieu?'
I cannot share the cravings of that tribe
Who sneak and bow and snatch each petty bribe –
Infuse my soul with Your sustaining love,
And I know neither hell nor heaven above;
I know but You; no faith or blasphemy
Could make me swerve from my fidelity;
I love but You; to You I must resign
My thirsting soul and take Your soul for mine –
Both worlds for me are You; You are my creed;
I recognize no other hope or need –
A hair's breadth lies between us now – remove
This last impediment to perfect love,

lines 3065–73

And if my wayward soul attempts to stir
Our mingled whispers will admonish her."

God said to David: "Tell my servants prayer

Should be creation's all-consuming care;
Though hell were not his fear nor heaven his goal,
The Lord should wholly occupy man's soul.
But if the sun did not light up the day,
They would not think of Me, nor ever pray –
Their prayers know nothing of love's selfless pain;
Not love inspires them but mere lust for gain.
True prayer seeks God alone; its motives start
Deep in the centre of a contrite heart.
Tell them to turn from all that is not Me;
To worship none but God continuously;
To heap together all the world can show;
To break it piece by piece and blow by blow;
To bum these fragments in one vivid flash,
And scatter on the winds the swirling ash –
When they have done this they will understand
The ash they grasped for with each greedy hand."
If it is paradise for which you pray
You can be sure that you have lost your way.

A story of Mahmoud and Ayaz

Shah Mahmoud called Ayaz to him and gave
His crown and throne to this bewitching slave,
Then said: "You are the sovereign of these lands;
I place my mighty army in your hands –
I wish for you unrivalled majesty,
That you enslave the very sky and sea."
But when the soldiers heard of this, their eyes
Grew black with envy they could not disguise.
"What emperor in all the World," they said,
"Has heaped such honours on a servile head?"
Though even as they murmured Ayaz wept

lines 3074–3106

That what the king decreed he must accept;
The courtiers said to him: "You are insane
To change from slave to king and then complain!"

But Ayaz answered them: “O, rather say
My king desires me to be far away,
To lead the army and be occupied
In almost any place but by his side.
What he commands I’ll do, but in my heart
We shall not for one instant – live apart;
And what have I to do with majesty?
To see my king is realm enough for me.”
If you would be a pilgrim of the Truth,
Learn how to worship from this lovely youth.
Day follows night – you argue and protest
And cannot pass the first stage of our quest;
Each night you chatter as the hours pass by
And send Orion down the dawning sky,
And still you linger – though another day
Has broken, you’re no further on your way.
From highest heaven they came to welcome you,
And you made lame excuses and withdrew!
Alas! You’re not the man for this; your thoughts
See hell’s despair and heaven’s wondrous courts –
Forget these two, and glory’s radiant light
Will stage by stage emerge from darkest night;
The pilgrim does not long for paradise –
Keep back your heart; He only will suffice.

Rabe’eh’s prayer

This was the common hymn of Rabe’eh:
“O God, who knows all secrets,” she would pray,
“May fortune favour all my enemies,
And may my friends taste heaven’s ecstasies;
It is not this world or the next I crave
But, for one moment, to be called Your slave –
With passion I embrace this poverty;

lines 3107–21

Such endless blessings flow from You to me
If I desire this world or shrink from hell,

I am no better than an infidel."
A man has everything who knows his Lord –
The world and all its seven seas afford.
All that the universe has ever shown
Can find its match but God, who is alone;
And only He, wherever you may seek,
Is absolute, abiding, and unique.

God counselled David: "There is nothing here
Of good or bad, unseen or far or near,
Which does not have some cunning complement;
For only I have no equivalent.
I am alone; make me your single goal –
My presence is sufficient for your soul;
I am your God, your one necessity –
With every breath you breathe remember Me;
Make God your one desire, for only I
Shall live eternally and never die."
And you – obsessed with what the world contains,
Subjected day and night to envy's pains –
Turn now and put our journey to the test;
In this world and the next make Him your quest;
To choose what is not God is to prefer
To be some worthless idol's worshipper,
And if this idol is your soul, your creed
Is nothing more than irreligious greed.

Shah Mahmoud at Somnat

When Mahmoud's army had attacked Somnat
They found an idol there that men called "Lat".*

lines 3122–43

Its worshippers flung treasure on the ground
And as a ransom gave the glittering mound;
But Mahmoud would not cede to their desire
And burnt the idol in a raging fire.

A courtier said: “Now if it had been sold
We’d have what’s better than an idol – gold!”
Shah Mahmoud said: “I feared God’s Judgement Day;
I was afraid that I should hear Him say
‘Here two – Azar and Mahmoud – stand, behold!
One carved his idols, one had idols sold!’”
And as the idol burned, bright jewels fell out –
So Mahmoud was enriched but stayed devout;
He said: “This idol Lat has her reward,
And here is mine, provided by the Lord.”
Destroy the idols in your heart, or you
Will one day be a broken idol too –
First burn the Self, and as its fate is sealed
The gems this idol hides will be revealed.
Your soul has heard the Lord’s commanding call;
Accept, and at His threshold humbly fall.
Your soul and God have formed a covenant;
Do not turn back from that first firm assent –
Will you object to what you once averred,
Swear true allegiance and then break your word?
Your soul needs only Him – through good and ill
Keep faith, and what you promised Him fulfil.

Another story of Shah Mahmoud in India

Mahmoud began his Indian campaign
And saw before him, drawn up on the plain,
The massive army of his enemy –
In fear he prayed to God for victory
And said: “If I should win this doubtful day,
The dervishes will bear the spoils away.”
They fought, and Mahmoud’s conquest was complete –
His captives piled their treasures at his feet.

lines 3144–64

The king declared: “1 will fulfil my vow;
The dervishes shall have this booty now,”
But all his courtiers cried: “Can gold and jewels

Be given to that crowd of cringing fools?
Reward the soldiers who have won this war,

Or have it piled up in the royal store."
What should he do? Shah Mahmoud was unsure.
Just then his eye caught sight of BoulHossein,
A pious fool whom many thought insane;
He said: "Whatever that man says, I'll do –
No kings or armies influence his view."
They called the madman over to the king,
Who welcomed him and told him everything.
The madman said: "O king, these anxious pains
Are not worth more than two small barley grains –
If all your dealings with the Lord cease here,
forget the vow you made and never fear;
But if you think you might need Him again
Then keep your promise to the final grain.
God gave the victory to you; now where
In this agreement is your lordship's share?"
So Mabmoud gave the gold where it was owed,
And took his way along the royal road.'

A bird asks what gifts he should take the Simorgh

Another bird said: 'You have seen our king –
What gifts would it be right for me to bring?
I'll gladly get whatever you advise;
What would be welcome to our sovereign's eyes?
A king deserves a quite distinctive gift;
Only a miser would be ruled by thrift!'

The hoopoe answers him

‘Be ruled by me,’ the hoopoe said. ‘Take care
To offer something which is lacking there –
Where is the point in dragging all that way

lines 3165–83

A costly present common there as day?
There mystery resides and confidence,
Pure knowledge and the soul’s obedience –
But take the torment of a heart alone,
The soul’s distress, for these are there unknown,
And let the anguish you endure arise
Borne upward to the king in bitter sighs;
If one sigh rises from the inmost soul,
That man is saved, and has attained our goal.

Zuleikha has Joseph whipped

Zuleikha used her great authority
To have poor Joseph kept in custody –
She gave her callous orders to the guard:
“Give that man fifty lashes, good and hard!
Deal with this Joseph’s body so that I
From far away can hear him groan and sigh.”
But when the guard saw Joseph’s face he felt
The cold indifference of his calling melt.
There was a leather coat left on the ground,
And with his whip he made this skin resound –
As every blow descended on the coat,
A scream of pain went up from Joseph’s throat.
But when Zuleikha heard his voice she cried:
“You are too soft; whip harder, break his pride!”
The guard said: “What, dear Joseph, can I do?
Zuleikha only has to look at you
And see no weals or bruises on your back,
And I’ll be torn to pieces on the rack –
So bare your shoulders to the lash; some sign
Must mar your skin if I’m to rescue mine.”
When Joseph stripped in readiness, a sound

Of mourning spread from heaven to the ground;
The guard's right arm was raised, and its descent
Produced a cry that split the firmament –
Zuleikha said: "Now Joseph cannot bluff;

lines 3184–98

This sigh is from his inmost soul – enough!
This sigh was real and from his essence came –
His former groans were nothing but a game."

The mourners at a funeral

A hundred mourners at a funeral grieved;
One truly sighed – the man who was bereaved.
They were a ring, but only one of them
Was set within that circle as a gem –
Till you have truly mourned beside the grave,
You cannot take your place among the brave.
Love drives the wandering pilgrim on his quest;
And where by day or night will he find rest?

The devout slave

A negro had a slave devout and wise
Who at an early hour would wake and rise,
Then pray until the sun came peeping through.
His master said: "Wake me up early too,
And we can pray together till the dawn."
The slave said: "Just before a baby's born,
Who tells the mother 'Now your time draws near'?
She knows it does – her pain has made it clear;
If you have felt this pain you are awake –
No other man can feel it for your sake.
If someone has to rouse you every day,
Then someone else instead of you should pray."
The man without this pain is not a man;
May grief destroy the bragging charlatan!

But one who is entangled in its spell
Forgets all thoughts of heaven or of hell.

A vision of heaven and hell

Sheikh Bou Ali Tousi's long pilgrimage
(He was the wisest savant of his age)

lines 3199–3217

Conducted him so far that I know none
Who could draw near to what this man has done.
He said: "The wretches damned in hell will cry
To those in paradise: 'O, testify
To us the nature of your happiness;
Describe the sacred joys which you possess!'
And they will say: 'Ineffable delight
Shines in the radiance of His face; its light
Draws near us, and this vast celestial frame –
The eightfold heaven – darkens, bowed by shame.'
And then the tortured souls in hell will say:
'From joys of paradise you turn away;
Such lowly happiness is not for you –
All that you say is true, we know how true!
In hell's accursed provinces we reign
Clothed head to foot in fire's devouring pain;
But when we glimpse that radiant face and know
That we must live for ever here below,
Cut off through all eternity from grace –
Such longing seizes us for that far face,
Such unappeasable and wild regret,
That in our anguished torment we forget
The pit of hell and all its raging fire;
For what are flames to comfortless desire?'"
The man who feels such longing takes no part
In public prayers; he prays within his heart.
Regret and sighs should be your portion here;
In sighs rejoice, in longing persevere –
And if beneath the sky's oppressive dome

Wounds scar you, you draw nearer to your home;
Don't flinch from pain or search here for its cure.
Uncauterized your wounds must bleed; endure!

The man who wanted a prayer-mat

Once someone asked the Prophet to provide
A prayer-mat, and the best of men replied:

lines 3218–33

"The desert's arid sands are burning now.
Pray there; against the hot dust press your brow
And feel it sear your flesh; the wounded skin
Will be an emblem of the wound within."
If no scar marks your heart, the countenance
Of love will pass you by without a glance;
But heart's wounds show that on the battlefield
Your friends have found a man who will not yield.'

A bird asks how long the journey is, and the hoopoe describes the seven valleys of the Way

Another bird said: 'Hoopoe, you can find
The way from here, but we are almost blind –
The path seems full of terrors and despair.
Dear hoopoe, how much further till we're there?'

'Before we reach our goal,' the hoopoe said,
'The journey's seven valleys lie ahead;
How far this is the world has never learned,
For no one who has gone there has returned –
Impatient bird, who would retrace this trail?
There is no messenger to tell the tale,
And they are lost to our concerns below –
How can men tell you what they do not know?

The first stage is the Valley of the Quest;
Then Love's wide valley is our second test;
The third is Insight into Mystery,
The fourth Detachment and Serenity –
The fifth is Unity; the sixth is Awe,
A deep Bewilderment unknown before,
The seventh Poverty and Nothingness –
And there you are suspended, motionless,
Till you are drawn – the impulse is not yours –
A drop absorbed in seas that have no shores.

lines 3234–50

The Valley of the Quest

When you begin the Valley of the Quest
Misfortunes will deprive you of all rest,
Each moment some new trouble terrifies,
And parrots there are panic-stricken flies.
There years must vanish while you strive and grieve;
There is the heart of all you will achieve –
Renounce the world, your power and all you own,
And in your heart's blood journey on alone.
When once your hands are empty, then your heart
Must purify itself and move apart
From everything that is – when this is done,
The Lord's light blazes brighter than the sun,
Your heart is bathed in splendour and the quest
Expands a thousandfold within your breast.
Though fire flares up across his path, and though
A hundred monsters peer out from its glow,
The pilgrim driven on by his desire
Will like a moth rush gladly on the fire.
When love inspires his heart he begs for wine,
One drop to be vouchsafed him as a sign –
And when he drinks this drop both worlds are gone;
Dry-lipped he founders in oblivion.
His zeal to know faith's mysteries will make
Him fight with dragons for salvation's sake –

Though blasphemy and curses crowd the gate,
Until it opens he will calmly wait,
And then where is this faith? this blasphemy?
Both vanish into strengthless vacancy.

Eblis and God's curse*

God breathed the pure soul into Adam's dust,
And as He did so said the angels must,

lines 3251–72

In sight of Adam, bow down to the ground
(God did not wish this secret to be found).
All bowed, and not one saw what God had done,
Except Eblis, who bowed himself to none.
He said: "Who notices if I don't bow?
I don't care if they cut my head off now;
I know this Adam's more than dust – I'll see
Why God has ordered all this secrecy."
He hid himself and kept watch like a spy.

God said: "Come out – I see you peer and pry;
You know my treasure's home and you must die.
The kings who hide a treasure execute
Their secret's witnesses to keep them mute –
You saw the place, and shall the fact be spread
Through all the world? Prepare to lose your head!"
Eblis replied: "Lord, pity me; I crave
For mercy, Lord; have mercy on your slave."
God answered him: "Well, I will mitigate
The rigour and the justice of your fate;
But round your neck will shine a ring to show
Your treachery to all the world below –

For fraudulence and guile you will be known
Until the world ends and the last trump's blown."
Eblis replied: "And what is that to me?
I saw the treasure and I now go free!
To curse belongs to You and to forgive,
All creatures of the world and how they live;
Curse on! This poison's part of Your great scheme
And life is more than just an opium-dream.
All creatures seek throughout the universe
What will be mine for ever now – Your curse!"
Search for Him endlessly by day and night,
Till victory rewards your stubborn fight;
And if He seems elusive He is there –
Your search is incomplete; do not despair.

lines 3273–91

The death of Shebli

As Shebli's death approached his eyes grew dim;
Wild torments of impatience troubled him –
But strangest was that round his waist he tied
A heathen's belt,* and weeping sat beside
Heaped ash, with which he smeared his hair and head.
"Why wait for death like this?" a stranger said,
And Shebli cried: "What will become of me?
I melt, I burn with fevered jealousy,
And though I have renounced the universe
I covet what Eblis procured – God's curse."
So Shebli mourned, uncaring if his Lord
Gave other mortals this or that reward;
Bright jewels and stones are equal from His hand,
And if His gems are all that you demand,
Ours is a Way you cannot

understand –
Think of the stones and jewels he gives as one;
They are not yours to hope for or to shun.
The stone your angry lover flings may hurt,
But others' jewels compared with it are dirt.
Each moment of this quest a man must feel
His soul is spilt, and unremitting zeal
Should force him onward at whatever cost –
The man who pauses on our path is lost.

Majnoun searches for Leili

Once someone saw Majnoun, oppressed with pain,
Sifting the dusty highway grain by grain,
And asked: "What are you searching for, my friend?"
He cried: "My search for Leili has no end."
The man protested: "Leili is a girl,
And dust will not conceal this precious pearl!"
Majnoun replied: "I search in every place;
Who knows where I may glimpse her lovely face?"

lines 3292–3310

Yusef of Hamadan, a learned seer,
Once said: "Above, below, in every sphere,
Each atom is a Jacob fervently
Searching for Joseph through eternity."
By pain and grief the pilgrim is perplexed
But struggles on through this world and the next –
And if the goal seems endlessly concealed,
Do not give up your quest; refuse to yield.
What patience must be theirs who undertake
The pilgrim's journey for salvation's sake!
Now, like a baby curled inside the womb,
Wait patiently within your narrow room;
Ignore the world – blood is your element;
Blood is the unborn child's sole nourishment.*
What is the world but wretchedness and fear?
Endure, be steadfast till your time draws near.

Sheikh Mahna and the peasant

In deep despair Sheikh Mahna made his way
Across the empty desert wastes one day.
A peasant with a cow came into sight,
And from his body played a lambent light –
He hailed the man and started to narrate
The hopeless turmoil of his wretched state.
The old man heard, then said: "O Bou Sa'id,
Imagine someone piled up millet seed
From here to highest heaven's unknown dimes,
And then repeated this a hundred times;
And now imagine that a bird appears
And pecks one grain up every thousand years,
Then flies around the earth's circumference
A hundred times – from heaven's eminence
In all those years no sign would come to show
Sheikh Bou Sa'id the Truth he longs to know."

lines 3311–30

Such is the patience that our pilgrims need,
And many start our quest, but few succeed;
Through pain and blood their journey lies – blood hides
The precious musk the hunted deer provides;
And he who does not seek is like a wall,
Dead, blank and bland, no living man at all;
He is, God pardon me, a walking skin,
A picture with no life or soul within.
If you discover in your quest a jewel,
Do not, like some delighted doting fool,
Gloat over it – search on, you're not its slave;
It is not treasures by the way you crave.
To make an idol of the gems you find
Is to be drunk, to cloud the searching mind –
At this first glass your soul should not submit;
Seek out the wine-press of the infinite.

Shah Mahmoud and the sweeper

Shah Mahmoud rode without a guard one night.
A man who swept the streets came into sight,
Sifting through dust-heaps pile by filthy pile.
The king drew rein and with a gracious smile
Flung down his bracelet on the nearest heap;
Then like the wind he left the searching sweep.
Some later night the king returned and saw
The man engaged exactly as before.
He said: “I threw a bracelet on the ground;
You could redeem the world with what you found!
You could be like a king, a lord of men,
And yet I find you sifting dust again!”
The sweep replied: “The treasure that you gave
Made me a hidden, greater treasure’s slave –
I have perceived the door to wealth and I
Shall sift through dust-heaps till the day I die.”
Search for the Way! The door stands open, but
Your eyes that should perceive the door are shut!

lines 3331–48

Once someone cried to God: “Lord, let me see
The door between us opened unto me !”
And Rabe’eh said: “Fool to chatter so –
When has the door been closed, I’d like to know?”

The Valley of Love

Love’s valley is the next, and here desire
Will plunge the pilgrim into seas of fire,
Until his very being is enflamed
And those whom fire rejects turn back ashamed.
The lover is a man who flares and bums,
Whose face is fevered, who in frenzy yearns,
Who knows no prudence, who will gladly send

A hundred worlds toward their blazing end,
Who knows of neither faith nor blasphemy,
Who has no time for doubt or certainty,
To whom both good and evil are the same,
And who is neither, but a living flame.
But you! Lukewarm in all you say or do,
Backsliding, weak –O, no, this is not you
True lovers give up everything they own
To steal one moment with the Friend alone –
They make no vague, procrastinating vow,
But risk their livelihood and risk it now.
Until their hearts are burnt, how can they flee
From their desire's incessant misery?
They are the falcon when it flies distressed
In circles, searching for its absent nest –
They are the fish cast up upon the land
That seeks the sea and shudders on the sand.
Love here is fire; its thick smoke clouds the head –
When love has come the intellect has fled;
It cannot tutor love, and all its care
Supplies no remedy for love's despair.
If you could seek the unseen you would find

lines 3349–64

Love's home, which is not reason or the mind,
And love's intoxication tumbles down
The world's designs for glory and renown –
If you could penetrate their passing show
And see the world's wild atoms, you would know
That reason's eyes will never glimpse one spark
Of shining love to mitigate the dark.
Love leads whoever starts along our Way;
The noblest bow to love and must obey –
But you, unwilling both to love and tread
The pilgrim's path, you might as well be dead!
The lover chafes, impatient to depart,
And longs to sacrifice his life and heart.

A lord who loved a beer-seller

Love led a lord through paths of misery.
He left his splendid house and family
And acted like a drunkard to be near
The boy he loved, who lived by selling beer –
He sold his house and slaves and all he had
To get the means to buy beer from this lad.
When everything was gone and he grew poor
His love grew stronger, more and then yet more –
Though food was given him by passers-by,
His endless hunger made him long to die
(Each morsel that he had would disappear,
Not to be eaten but exchanged for beer,
And he was happy to endure the pain,
Knowing that soon he could buy beer again).
When someone asked: "What is this love?" he cried:
"It is to sell the world and all its pride –
A hundred times – to buy one drop of beer."
Such acts denote true love, and it is clear
That those who cannot match this devotee
Have no acquaintance with love's misery.

lines 3365–77

Majnoun's love for Leili

When Leili's tribe refused Majnoun, he found
They would not let him near their camping-ground.
Distraught with love, he met a shepherd there
And asked him for a sheepskin he could wear,
And then, beneath the skin, began to creep
On hands and knees as if he were a sheep.
"Now lead your flock," he cried, "past Leili's tent;
It may be I shall catch her lovely scent
And hidden by this matted fleece receive
From untold misery one hour's reprieve."
And so Majnoun, disguised beneath the skin,
Drew near his love unnoticed by her kin –

Joy welled in him and in its wild excess
The frenzied lover lost all consciousness;
Love's fire had dried the fluids of his brain –
He fainted and lay stretched out on the plain;
The shepherd bore him to a shaded place
And splashed cold water on his burning face.
Later, Majnoun was talking with some friends
When one said: "What a tattered fleece defends
Your body from the cold; but trust in me
I'll bring you all you need immediately."
Majnoun replied: "No garment's worthy of
Dear Leili, but I wear this skin for love –
I know how fortune favours me, and I
Burn rue to turn away the Evil Eye."
The fleece for him was silk and rare brocade;
With what else should a lover be arrayed?
I too have known love scent the passing air –
What other finer garment could I wear?
If you would scour yourself of each defect,
Let passion wean you from the intellect –
To leave such toys and sacrifice the soul
Is still the first small step towards our goal.
Begin, if you can set aside all shame –
To risk your life is not some childish game.

lines 3378–3405

The beggar who fell in love with Ayaz

A beggar fell in love once with Ayaz –
The news soon spread through markets and bazaars,
And when he rode about the gaping town
There was the beggar running up and down;
Or if Ayaz once halted in the square,
His eyes would meet the beggar's hungry stare.
But someone gossiped to Mahmoud, who went
To try and apprehend the miscreant –
Ayaz rode out; Mahmoud was horrified
To see the beggar running at his side,

And from his hiding-place the monarch saw
The beggar's face, wasted like yellow straw,
His back bent like a polo-mallet's curve –
From side to side he watched him duck and swerve,
As if he had no self-control at all
But moved when hit just like a polo-ball.
He summoned him, then said: "And so you thought
A beggar could be equal to the court?"
The man replied: "In matters of desire,
A beggar is his monarch's equal, sire –
You cannot sunder love from pauper's rags;
They're like a rich man and his money bags –
And poverty in love resembles salt:
It gives love taste; you can't call that a fault!
You have the world and love your sovereignty –
You should leave passion to the likes of me!
Your love is with you; you need never know
The pains of absence love should undergo.
O, you are proud to have him, but love's trial
Would come if you should lose him for a while."
The king said: "You are ignorant, that's all –
Staring as if he were a polo-ball!"
"It's me who is the ball," the man replied;
"Look – both of us are struck from side to side;
Each shares the other's pain, each feels the force
Of Ayaz when he rides by on his horse –

lines 3406–27

We're both bewildered by his mallet's blows,
And where we're going neither of us knows.
But if we share the same predicament
And seem in grief to be equivalent,
Yet still the ball does more than I can do
And sometimes gets to kiss his horse's shoe.
Though both are hurt, mine is the grimmer part –
Its skin is scarred, my scars are in my heart.
Ayaz pursues the ball he hits – but I
In unregarded agony must sigh;

The ball will sometimes land at Ayaz' feet,
But when shall Ayaz and a beggar meet?
The ball will know the scent of victory
But all such joys have been denied to me!"
The king cried: "You may boast that you are poor,
But where's your witness? How can I be sure?"
"I don't belong here, sire," the beggar said,
"But I'm not poor and you have been misled;
You want a witness – if I sacrifice
My living soul for love, will that suffice?
O Mahmoud, love like yours is meaningless;
Die if you want to boast of your distress!"
Then, in the silence after he replied,
He sank at his beloved's feet and died –
And when he saw the lifeless body there
The world was darkened by Mahmoud's despair.
Prepare to risk your being while you live,
And know the glory sacrifice will give –
If you are summoned by that distant call,
Pursue the fading sound until you fall;
And as you fall the news you longed to find
Will break at last on your bewildered mind.

The Arab in Persia

Through Persia once an Arab took his way,
Where foreign customs filled him with dismay –

lines 3428–48

He met a group of dervishes, who had
Renounced the world and seemed to him quite mad
(But don't be fooled – if they seem filthy thieves
They are far purer than the world believes,
And though in drunkenness they seem to sink
The ecstasy they know is not from drink).
The Arab saw these men;
without a sound

He fainted and lay stretched
out on the ground –
They quickly splashed his face
to bring him round
And then cried: “Enter, no-one, enter here!”
And in he went, though torn by doubt and fear.
They made him drunk, he lost himself, and soon
His mind had foundered in a vacant swoon;
His gold, his jewels, his very livelihood
Were stolen there and disappeared for good –
A dervish gave him more to drink, and then
They pushed him naked out of doors again.
Dry-lipped and poor the man was forced to roam,
A naked beggar, till he reached his home,
And there the Arabs said: “But what’s gone wrong?
Where is your wealth, where have you been so long?
Your gold and silver’s gone, what can you do ?
This Persian expedition’s ruined you!
Did thieves attack you? You don’t say a word –
You seem so different; tell us what occurred.”
He said: “I went as usual – full of pride –
Then saw a dervish by the highway’s side.
But then what happened next I can’t be sure;
My gold and silver went and now I’m poor!”
They said: “Describe this man who blocked your way.”
He said: “I have; there’s nothing more to say.”
His mind was still elsewhere and all he heard
Seemed idle chatter, empty and absurd.
Enter the Way or seek some other goal,
But do so to the utmost of your soul;
Risk all, and as a naked beggar roam
If you would hear that “Enter” call you home.

lines 3449–68

The lover who wanted to kill his beloved

A selfless youth had lost his heart to one
Whose beauty beggared all comparison,
But then the girl grew sick (as Fate decreed),
As thin and yellow as a rotten reed.
Now death approached – she seemed to waste away;
Dark night descended on the brightest day.
When he was told his love despaired of life,
The youth ran riot, brandishing a knife,
And cried: "If Death – which no man can withstand –
Has come, then let her perish by my hand!"
But someone grabbed the wild youth's arm and said:

"What point is murder, fool? Why should you shed
Her blood when in the hour she will be dead?"
"But if I kill her," came the youth's reply,
"The law decrees that I too have to die,
And at the resurrection hell will be
My burning doom through all eternity;
Thus I shall die for her today and light
A candle for her in the future's night –
To die for her is my supreme desire,
To die, and burn for her in endless fire."
True lovers tread this path and turn aside
From this world and the next unsatisfied;
Their souls rise up from death and seek above
The undiscovered, secret home of love.

The death of Abraham

As Abraham approached his life's last breath,
He fought with Azra'el and parried death.
"Go back," he cried, "and tell my king to wait;
The king's friend will arrive a little late."

God answered him: “But if you are my friend,
You are prepared, and glad, to reach life’s end.”
Then someone said: “What makes your soul rebel

lines 3469–85

And seek to hide itself from Azra’el?
True-hearted lovers risk their lives; so why
Are you reluctant or afraid to die?”
And he replied: “How can I give my soul
When Azra’el obscures the longed-for goal?
When Gabriel himself appeared in fire
And asked me to describe my heart’s desire,
I did not glance at him; the path I trod
Had then as now no other goal but God –
I turned my head aside from Gabriel,
And shall I hand my soul to Azra’el?
I shall not give this soul until I hear
The word of God command me to draw near;
And when I hear His voice this life will be
Less use than half a barley grain to me –
How could I give my soul to anyone
But Him? Enough, my explanation’s done!”

The Valley of Insight into Mystery

The next broad valley which the traveller sees
Brings insight into hidden mysteries;
Here every pilgrim takes a different way,
And different spirits different rules obey.
Each soul and body has its level here
And climbs or falls within its proper sphere –
There are so many roads, and each is fit
For that one pilgrim who must follow it.
How could a spider or a tiny ant
Tread the same path as some huge elephant?
Each pilgrim’s progress is commensurate

With his specific qualities and state
(No matter how it strives, what gnat could fly
As swiftly as the winds that scour the sky?).
Our pathways differ – no bird ever knows
The secret route by which another goes.
Our insight comes to us by different signs;

lines 3486–3505

One prays in mosques and one in idols' shrines –
But when Truth's sunlight clears the upper air,
Each pilgrim sees that he is welcomed there.
His essence will shine forth; the world that seemed
A furnace will be sweeter than he dreamed.
He will perceive the marrow, not the skin –
The Self will disappear; then, from within
The heart of all he sees, there will ascend
The longed-for face of the immortal Friend.
A hundred thousand secrets will be known
When that unveiled, surpassing face is shown –
A hundred thousand men must faint and fail
Till one shall draw aside the secrets' veil –
Perfected, of rare courage he must be
To dive through that immense, uncharted sea.
If you discern such hidden truths and feel
Joy flood your life, do not relax your zeal;
Though thirst is quenched, though you are bathed in bliss
Beyond all possible hypothesis,
Though you should reach the throne of God, implore
Him still unceasingly: "Is there yet more?"
Now let the sea of gnosis drown your mind,
Or dust and death are all that you will find.
If you ignore our quest and idly sleep,
You will not glimpse the Friend; rise now and weep.
And if you cannot find His beauty here,
Seek out Truth's mysteries and persevere!
But shame on you, you fool! Bow down your head;
Accept a donkey's bridle and be led!

The stone man

A man in China has become a stone;
He sits and mourns, and at each muffled groan
Weeps melancholy tears, which then are found
Congealed as pebbles scattered on the ground
(What misery the world would know, what pain,

lines 3506–25

If clouds should shed such adamantine rain!).
This man is Knowledge (sensible, devout;
If you should go to China seek him out),
But he has turned to stone from secret grief,
From lack of zeal, indifference, unbelief.
The world is dark, and Knowledge is a light,
A sparkling jewel to lead you through the night –
Without it you would wander mystified,
Like Alexander lost without a guide;
But if you trust its light too much, despair
Will be the sequel of pedantic care,
And if you underestimate this jewel
Despair will mark you as a righteous fool
(Ignore or overvalue this bright stone,
And wretchedness will claim you for her own).
If you can step outside the stage we know,
The dark confusions of our life below,
And reach man's proper state, you will possess
Wisdom at which the world can never guess.
The path brings sorrow and bewildered fear,
But venture on until the Way is clear,
And neither sleep by night nor drink by day,
But give your life – completely – to the Way.

The lover who slept

A lover, tired out by the tears he wept,
Lay in exhaustion on the earth and slept;
When his beloved came and saw him there,

Sunk fast in sleep, at peace, without a care,
She took a pen and in an instant wrote,
Then fastened to his sleeve, a little note.
When he awoke and read her words his pain
(Increased a thousandfold) returned again –
"If you sell silver in the town," he read,
"The market's opened, rouse your sleepy head;
If faith is your concern, pray through the night –

lines 3526–43

Prostrate yourself until the dawning light;
But if you are a lover, blush with shame;
Sleep is unworthy of the lover's name!
He watches with the wind throughout the day;
He sees the moon rise up and fade away –
But you do neither, though you weep and sigh;
Your love for me looks like an empty lie.
A man who sleeps before death's sleep I call
A lover of him self, and that is all!
You've no idea of love, and may your sleep
Be like your ignorance–prolonged and deep!"

A watchman in love

A watchman fell in love – the poor man kept
Love's vigil day and night and never slept.
A friend reproved this lover. "Sleep!" he cried,
"sleep for one moment!" But the man replied:
"I am a lover and a watchman; how
Could I know sleep and break this double vow?
How can a watchman sleep? especially
A wretched watchman who's in love like me ?
My earthly duties and my love unite
To ward off sleep throughout the longest night.
There's no sleep in me – can I ask a friend
For sleep? It's not a substance you can lend!
Each night love puts his watchman to the test,
Watching to see the watchman has no rest,

Beating a drum as if to wake the dead,
Or slapping me about the face and head –
And if I slept a moment, sleepless love
Would raise a tumult to the skies above."
His friend said: "But you never even blink;
All night you burn and cannot sleep a wink!"
He answered him: "A watchman never sleeps;
He knows no water but the tears he weeps –
A watchman's duty is to stay awake,

lines 3544–63

And lovers parch with thirst for passion's sake;
Since lovers' eyes are filled with flowing tears
Sweet sleep is driven out and disappears –
A lover and a watchman should agree,
Since neither sleeps through all eternity.
Love helps the watchman's vigilance; its pain
Will banish slumber from his fevered brain."
Shun sleep if you would be this sentinel
(Though if your vigil is mere talk, sleep well!).
Pace the heart's streets; thieves lurk in ambush there,
Waiting for you to waver in your care;
But as you scan the darkness you will find
New love and insight wake within your mind;
The man who suffers, who will watch and wait,
Is given insight by his sleepless state,
And sleepless nights enable him to bring
A tried and wakeful heart before his king.
Since sleepless watches nourish vigilance,
Sleep little, guard your heart with diligence –
What shall I say? What words have ever found
A means to save the sinking? You are drowned!
But lovers journey on before us all;
Intoxicated by their love, they fall –
Strive, drink as they have drunk, discover love,
The key to this world and the world above;
A woman will become a man, a man
A sea whose depths no mortal mind may scan.

Abbasseh told a wandering scholar once:
“The man who’s kindled by love’s radiance
Will give birth to a woman; when love’s fire
Quickens within a woman this desire,
She gives birth to a man; is it denied
That Adam bore a woman from his side,
That Mary bore a man? Until this light
Shines out, such truths are hidden from your sight;
But when its glory comes you will receive

lines 3564–80

Blessings far greater than you can conceive.
Count this as wealth; here is the faith you need.
But if the world’s base glory is your creed,
Your soul is lost–seek the wealth insight gives;
In insight our eternal kingdom lives.
Whoever drinks the mystics’ wine is king
Of all the world can show, of everything –
Its realms are specks of his authority,
The heavens but a ship on his wide sea;
If all the sultans of the world could know
That shoreless sea, its mighty ebb and flow,
They’d sit and mourn their wretched impotence
With eyes ashamed to meet each other’s glance.

Mahmoud and a dervish

Once in a ruined palace Mahmoud met
A dervish bowed by sorrow and regret,
Who when he saw his noble sovereign cried:
“Get out of here or I shall tan your hide –
You call yourself a king; you’re just a lout,
A thankless, selfish infidel – get out!”
The king said: “I am Mahmoud; I suggest
That ‘infidel’ is not how I’m addressed!”
The dervish answered him: “O splendid youth,

If you but knew how far you are from Truth,
You would not smear your humbled head and face
With dust and ash; live coals would take their place."

The Valley of Detachment

Next comes the Valley of Detachment; here
All claims, all lust for meaning disappear.
A wintry tempest blows with boisterous haste;
It scours the land and lays the valley waste –
The seven planets seem a fading spark,
The seven seas a pool, and heaven's arc

lines 3581–99

Is more like dust and death than paradise;
The seven burning hells freeze cold as ice.
More wonderful than this, a tiny ant
Is here far stronger than an elephant;
And, while a raven feeds, a caravan
Of countless souls will perish to a man.
A hundred thousand angels wept when light
Shone out in Adam and dispelled the night;
A hundred thousand drowning creatures died
When Noah's ark rode out the rising tide;
For Abraham, as many gnats were sent
To humble Ninirod's vicious government;
As many children perished by the sword
Till Moses' sight was cleansed before the Lord;
As many walked in wilful heresy
When Jesus saw Truth's hidden mystery;
As many souls endured their wretched fate
Before Mohammad rose to heaven's gate.
Here neither old nor new attempts prevail,
And resolution is of no avail.
If you should see the world consumed in flame,
It is a dream compared to this, a game;

If thousands were to die here, they would be
One drop of dew absorbed within the sea;
A hundred thousand fools would be as one
Brief atom's shadow in the blazing sun;
If all the stars and heavens came to grief,
They'd be the shedding of one withered leaf;
If all the worlds were swept away to hell,
They'd be a crawling ant trapped down a well;
If earth and heaven were to pass away,
One grain of gravel would have gone astray;
If men and fiends were never seen again,
They'd vanish like a tiny splash of rain;
And should they perish, broken by despair,
Think that some beast has lost a single hair;
If part and whole are wrecked and seen no more,

lines 3600–3618

Think that the earth has lost a single straw;
And if the nine revolving heavens stop,
Think that the sea has lost a single drop.

A youth who tumbled into a well

A fine youth living in our village fell
Into a deep and dangerous, dark well –
His fall dislodged the dust; a long time passed
Before they got the young man out at last,
But he had suffered underneath the grime –
It seemed his rescuers were just in time
(Mohammad was the poor boy's name); his breath
Was laboured and he lingered dose to death.
His father whimpered: "O my pride and joy,
Mohammad, speak to me, my precious boy."
"Where is Mohammad now?" the youth replied,
"Where is your son? Or anyone?" and died.
Good pilgrim, ask: Where is Mohammad, where?
And where is Adam and his every heir?
Where are the earth, the mountains and the sea?

Where are the angels and humanity?
Where are the bodies buried underground,
Where are their minds so subtle and profound?
Where is the pain of death? Where is the soul?
Where are the sundered parts? Where is the whole?
Sift through the universe, and it will seem
An airy maze, an insubstantial dream.

Yusef of Hamadan, that learnèd seer,
Whose heart and knowledge were uniquely clear,
Said: “Travel to the throne of Majesty,
Then to the ends of all the earth, and see
That all that is, will be, has ever been,
Is but one atom when correctly seen.”
The world is but a drop – what will be missed
If one son prospers or does not exist?

lines 3619–36

This valley is not easy, child – your mind
Knows nothing of the dangers you will find,
And when the Way flows blood your pilgrimage
Has only journeyed through a single stage.
Traverse the world from place to distant place;
What have you managed but a single pace?
No pilgrim sees his journey’s end; no cure
Has yet been found for all he must endure.
If you stand petrified with grief and dread,
You are no better than the senseless dead;
And if you hasten on you cannot hear
The bell that summons you sound loud and clear.
Hope lies neither in motion nor in rest;
Neither to live nor yet to die is best.
What profit have your labours brought? what gain
The teachers you pursued with so much pain ?
What difference have these constant efforts made?
Be silent now and seek another trade.
Strive not to strive; withdraw and concentrate

On that small region you can cultivate.
The remedy is labour – this is true,
But not that labour which is known to you –
Renounce the work you know, the tasks you've done,
And learn which tasks to work at, which to shun.
What words can guide you where you ought to turn?
It may be you will have the wit to learn;
But whether you lament or idly sing,
Act with detachment now in everything.
Detachment is a flame, a livid flash,
That will reduce a hundred worlds to ash;
Its valley makes creation disappear,
And if the world has gone, then where is fear?

A horoscope drawn on sand

Astrologers can help you understand
With fine configurations traced in sand –

lines 3637–56

You've seen one draw the heaven's calendar
And indicate each fixed and moving star,
Set out the zodiac sign by mighty sign,
The zenith of the sun and its decline –
The complex forms that influence the earth,
The house of mournful death, the house of birth,
Which will enable him to calculate
Your happiness, your grief, your final fate…
Then brush the sand – and all that you have seen
Has gone, as though the marks had never been.
Such is the solid world we live in here,
A subtle surface which will disappear.
You cannot bear this truth, that all must die –
Seek out some corner; watch the world pass by!
When men and women enter here they own
No trace of either world, they are alone.
When mountains weigh as little as a straw
You have the strength required, but not before.

Once someone said: “The veil was drawn aside;
I saw the secret world its shadows hide –
In bliss I heard a voice that seemed to say:
‘Name what you wish and it is yours today.’
But then I saw that from eternity
God’s prophets have endured adversity,
That, everywhere disaster takes its course,
They are the first to feel its crushing force –
And how can I expect contentment when
Such miseries beset the best of men?
Their glory and their grief could not be mine!
Since pain is theirs who set forth God’s design,
How can a wretch desire beatitude?
O, leave me to my helpless solitude!
The prophets led the world, but I am weak –
O, let me mourn alone, I cannot speak!”
My words must come from my experience,
And till you share it they will make no sense.

lines 3657–74

You know the dangers that this ocean brings,
But flounder like a partridge without wings –
The whirlpool waits, the monstrous whale, the shark,
And are you still determined to embark?
Imagination makes you waver – think,
How will you save yourself if you should sink?

The fly in the beehive

A hungry fly once saw a hive of bees;
Transported by delicious fantasies,
He buzzed: “What noble friend will be my guide?
I’d give a barley grain to get inside –
How marvellous if I could just contrive
To find myself in this delightful hive.”
A passer-by took pity on his pain,

Lifted him in and took the barley grain.
But when he reached the honey-store at last,
He found his wings and hairy joints stuck fast –
His sticky, struggling legs began to tire,
Encumbered by the honey's clammy mire.
He cried: "When free I didn't know my luck;
This honey's worse than poison. Help! I'm stuck!
To get into this mess I gave a grain;
I'd offer double to get out again!"
Within this valley no man can be free –
Your life has passed in thoughtless liberty;
But only adults can traverse this waste:
Let childhood go; a new life must be faced!
The valley waits; prepare now to depart;
Relinquish your beloved, selfish heart –
That pagan idol, that deceptive guide
Which turns detachment harmlessly aside.

A sheikh in love

A dervish sheikh became enamoured of
A girl whose father traded dogs. His love

lines 3675–91

Was like a surging sea that has no shore –
He slept among the dogs outside their door.
Her mother saw him lying there and said:
"Good sheikh, it seems my daughter's turned your head!
Well, if you want her you will have to be
A man who markets dogs, who lives like me.
Take up the dog trade; do it for a year
And then we'll have the wedding, never fear."
This love-lorn sheikh was not a man to shirk –
He tore his dervish cloak and set to work,
Leading the dogs to market every day
Until the promised year had passed away.
He saw a sufi there who said: "Dear friend,
Whatever led you to this wretched end?

For thirty years you were a man – what fate
Has brought you to this ludicrous, sad state?”
The sheikh replied: “Idiot, no sermons, please –
If you could see into these mysteries,
If God should show these secret truths to you,
You’d do exactly as you see me do.
When God unveils your shame, you’ll understand
What kind of dog-leash dangles from your hand!”

How much must I describe this journey’s pain?
Who heeds my talk? How long must I explain?
What is the point of all these words I say?
Not one of you has set out on the Way,
And till you set out you cannot perceive
The truth of all I urge you to believe –
Who shares the patient vigil that I keep?
What good’s a leader? – You are all asleep!

The pupil who asked for advice

There was a pupil once who begged his sheikh:
“Give me some good advice, for pity’s sake!”
The sheikh cried: “Leave me – go on, get away,

lines 3692–3707

And if you itch for what I’ve got to say,
First wash your face – musk can’t drive out a stink;
Words are no good to someone sick with drink!”

The Valley of Unity

Next comes the Valley of pure Unity,
place of lonely, long austerity,

And all who enter on this waste have found
Their various necks by one tight collar bound –
If you see many here or but a few,
They're one, however they appear to you.
The many here are merged in one; one form
Involves the multifarious, thick swarm
(This is the oneness of diversity,
Not oneness locked in singularity);
Unit and number here have passed away;
Forget for-ever and Creation's day –
That day is gone; eternity is gone;
Let them depart into oblivion.

The world compared to a wax toy

Once someone asked a dervish to portray
The nature of this world in which we stray.
He said: "This various world is like a toy –
A coloured palm-tree given to a boy,
But made of wax – now knead it in your fist,
And there's the wax of which its shapes consist;
The lovely forms and colours are undone,
And what seemed many things is only one.
All things are one – there isn't any two;
It isn't me who speaks; it isn't you."

Bou Ali and the old woman

An ancient crone once went to Bou Ali
And said: "This gold-leaf is a gift from me."

lines 3708–28

I've taken gifts from no one except God."
The woman laughed: "Well said, and no mistake
How many can you see, 0 reverend sheikh?
The man who treads the Way sees one alone
And counts a temple as the Ka'abah's stone."

Listen! Attend to all He has to say,
For His existence cannot pass away;
The pilgrim sees no form but His and knows
That He subsists beneath all passing shows –
The pilgrim comes from Him whom he can see,
Lives in Him, with Him, and beyond all three.
Be lost in Unity's inclusive span,
Or you are human but not yet a man.
Whoever lives, the wicked and the blessed,
Contains a hidden sun within his breast –
Its light must dawn though dogged by long delay;
The clouds that veil it must be torn away –
Whoever reaches to his hidden sun
Surpasses good and bad and knows the One.
This good and bad are here while you are here;
Surpass yourself and they will disappear.
You come from nothing but he caught within
The cumbersome entanglements of sin –
Would that your first blank state were with you yet,
Before existence trapped you inks net.
First free yourself from sin's adhesive loam,
Then be dispersed in dust and wind-swept foam.
How could you guess what ills within you lurk,
The foulness of their haunts, the dripping murk,
Where snake and scorpion slither through the deep,
Then undiscovered lose themselves in sleep?
Wake them, encourage them, and they will swell
Into a hundred monsters loosed from hell.
All men contain this evil in their hearts,
And hell is yours till every snake departs –
Work free of each insinuating coil;

lines 3729–47

Your soul's salvation will reward your toil.
If not, you are the hidden scorpion's prey,
The quick snake's quarry till God's Judgement Day;
And those who will not seek this freedom crawl
Like worms who have no higher life at all…'

Attar! Enough of all this oratory;
Resume your tale, you'd got to 'Unity'.
'When once the pilgrim has attained this stage,
He will have passed beyond mere pilgrimage;
He will be lost and dumb – for God will speak,
The God whom all these wandering pilgrims seek –
Beyond all notions of the part, the Whole,
Of qualities and the essential soul.
All four of them will rise up from all four;
A hundred thousand states will rise and more.
In this strange school the inward eye detects
A hundred thousand yearning intellects,
But failure dogs the analytic mind,
Which whimpers like a child born deaf and blind.
To glimpse this secret is to turn aside
From both worlds, from all egocentric pride –
The pilgrim has no being, yet will be
A part of Being for eternity.

A slave's freedom

Loghman of Sarrakhs cried: "Dear God, behold
Your faithful servant, poor, bewildered, old –
An old slave is permitted to go free;
I've spent my life in patient loyalty,
I'm bent with grief, my black hair's turned to snow;
Grant manumission, Lord, and let me go."
A voice replied: "When you have gained release
From mind and thought, your slavery will cease;
You will be free when these two disappear."
He said: "Lord, it is You whom I revere;
What are the mind and all its ways to me?"

lines 3748–65

And left them there and then – in ecstasy
He danced and clapped his hands and boldly cried:
"Who am I now? The slave I was has died;
What's freedom, servitude, and where are they?

Both happiness and grief have fled away;
I neither own nor lack all qualities;
My blindness looks on secret mysteries –
I know not whether You are I, I You;
I lose myself in You; there is no two."

The lover who saved his beloved from drowning

A girl fell in a river – in a flash
Her lover dived in with a mighty splash,
And fought the current till he reached her side.
When they were safe again, the poor girl cried:
"By chance I tumbled in, but why should you
Come after me and hazard your life too?"
He said: "1 dived because the difference
Of 'I' and 'you' to lovers makes no sense –
A long time passed when we were separate,
But now that we have reached this single state
When you are me and I am wholly you,
What use is it to talk of us as two?"
All talk of two implies plurality –
When two has gone there will be Unity.

Mahmoud offers Ayaz the command of his armies

One day Mahmoud's unconquered armies made
A splendid pageant drawn up on parade;
And on a mountain-side to watch the show
Of elephants and soldiers spread below,
The king and his two favourite courtiers stood,
Hassan, the slave Ayaz, and Shah Mahmoud.
The serried soldiers, jostling elephants,
Seemed like a plague of locusts or of ants;

lines 3466–91

More armies at that moment filled the plain
Than all the world has seen or will again,

And Mahmoud said: “Ayaz, my child, look down –
All this is yours, dear boy; accept the crown.”
The great king spoke – Ayaz seemed quite unmoved,
Lost in his private thoughts; Hassan reproved
The youth and said: “Where are your manners, slave?
Think of the honour that our king just gave!
And yet you stand there like an imbecile,
And do not even murmur thanks or kneel –
How can you justify such gross neglect?
Is this the way you show your king respect?”
Ayaz was silent till this sermon’s end,
Then said: “Two answers come to me, my friend.
First then, a slave could grovel on the ground
Or gabble thanks and have the heavens resound
With some self-advertising, long address –
And climb above the king or say far less;
But who am I to interpose my voice
Between the king and his asserted choice?
The slave is his, and regal dignity
Demands that he decide and act, not me.
If in his praise I see both worlds unite,
It is no more than such a monarch’s right;
Can I – unworthy to be called his slave –
Comment on how he chooses to behave?”
And when Hassan had heard him speak he said:

“Ayaz, a thousand blessings on your head;

Your words convince me and I now believe
That you deserve the favours you receive –
But what’s the second of your answers, pray?”
Ayaz replied: “Hassan, I cannot say
Whilst you are here – you do not share the throne.
This mystery is for the king alone.”
The king dismissed Hassan. “There’s no one here,”
He said; “now make your hidden secret clear.”
Ayaz replied: “When generosity

Persuades my sovereign lord to glance at me,
My being vanishes in that bright light
Which radiates from his refulgent sight;
His splendour shines, and purified I rise,
Dispersed to nothing by his sun-like eyes.
Existence has deserted me, so how
Could I prostrate myself before you now?
If you see anyone or anything,
It is not me you see – it is the king!
The honours you continually renew
Are offered, given and received by you;
And from a shadow lost within the sun
What kind of service could you hope for? None!
That shadow called Ayaz must disappear –
Do what you wish; you know he is not here."

The Valley of Bewilderment

Next comes the Valley of Bewilderment,
A place of pain and gnawing discontent –
Each second you will sigh, and every breath
Will be a sword to make you long for death;
Blinded by grief, you will not recognize
The days and nights that pass before your eyes.
Blood drips from every hair and writes "Alas"
Beside the highway where the pilgrims pass;
In ice you fry, in fire you freeze – the Way
Is lost, with indecisive steps you stray –
The Unity you knew has gone; your soul
Is scattered and knows nothing of the Whole.
If someone asks: "What is your present state;
Is drunkenness or sober sense your fate,
And do you flourish now or fade away?"
The pilgrim will confess: "I cannot say;
I have no certain knowledge any more;
I doubt my doubt, doubt itself is unsure;

I love, but who is it for whom I sigh?
Not Moslem, yet not heathen; who am I?
My heart is empty, yet with love is full;
My own love is to me incredible."

The story of the princess who loved a slave

A great king had a daughter whose fair face
Was like the full moon in its radiant grace,
She seemed a Joseph, and her dimpled chin
The well that lovely youth was hidden in –
Her face was like a paradise; her hair
Reduced a hundred hearts to love's despair;
Her eyebrows were two bows bent back to shoot
The arrows of love's passionate dispute;
The pointed lashes of her humid eyes
Were thorns strewn in the pathway of the wise;
The beauty of this sun deceived the train
Of stars attendant on the moon's pale reign;
The rubies of her mouth were like a spell
To fascinate the angel Gabriel –
Beside her smile, her sweet, reviving breath,
The waters of eternal life seemed death;
Whoever saw her chin was lost and fell
Lamenting into love's unfathomed well;
And those she glanced at sank without a sound –
What rope could reach the depths in which they drowned?
It happened that a handsome slave was brought
To join the retinue that served at court,
A slave, but what a slave! Compared with him
The sun and moon looked overcast and dim.
He was uniquely beautiful – and when
He left the palace, women, children, men
Would crowd into the streets and market-place,
A hundred thousand wild to see his face.
One day the princess, by some fateful chance,
Caught sight of this surpassing elegante",

And as she glimpsed his face she felt her heart,
Her intellect, her self-control depart –
Now reason fled and love usurped its reign;
Her sweet soul trembled in love's bitter pain.
For days she meditated, struggled, strove,
But bowed at last before the force of love
And gave herself to longing, to the fire
Of passionate, insatiable desire.

Attendant on the daughter of the king
Were ten musicians, slave girls who could sing
Like nightingales – whose captivating charms
Would rival David's when he sang the psalms.
The princess set aside her noble name
And whispered to these girls her secret shame
(When love has first appeared who can expect
The frenzied lover to be circumspect?),
Then said: "If I am honest with this slave
And tell my love, who knows how he'll behave?
My honour's lost if he should once discover
His princess wishes that she were his lover!
But if I can't make my affection plain
I'll die, I'll waste away in secret pain;
I've read a hundred books on chastity
And still I burn – what good are they to me?
No, I must have him; this seductive youth
Must sleep with me and never know the truth –
If I can secretly achieve my goal
Love's bliss will satisfy my thirsting soul."
Her girls said: "Don't despair; tonight we'll bring
Your lover here and he won't know a thing."
One of them went to him – she simpered, smiled,
And O! how easily he was beguiled;
He took the drugged wine she'd prepared – he drank,
Then swooned – unconscious in her arms he sank,
And in that instant all her work was done;
He slept until the setting of the sun.

lines 3850–72

Night came and all was quiet as the grave;
Now, stealthily, the maidens brought this slave,
Wrapped in a blanket, to their mistress' bed
And laid him down with jewels about his head.
Midnight: he opened his dazed, lovely eyes
And stared about him with a mute surprise –
The bed was massy gold; the chamber seemed
An earthly paradise that he had dreamed;
Two candles made of ambergris burnt there
And with their fainting fragrance filled the air;
The slave girls made such music that his soul
Seemed beckoned onward to some distant goal;
Wine passed from hand to hand; the candles' light
Flared like a sun to drive away the night.
But all the joys of this celestial place
Could not compare with her bewitching face,
At which he stared as if struck senseless, dumb,
Lost both to this world and the world to come –
His heart acknowledged love's supremacy;
His soul submitted to love's ecstasy;
His eyes were fixed on hers, while to his ears
The girls' song seemed the music of the spheres;
He smelt the burning candles' ambergris;
His mouth burnt with the wine, then with her kiss;
He could not look away, he could not speak,
But tears of eloquence coursed down his cheek –
And she too wept, so that each kiss was graced
With salty sweetness mingled in one taste,
Or he would push aside her stubborn hair
And on her lovely eyes in wonder stare.
Thus, in each other's arms, they passed the night
Until, worn out by sensual delight,
By passion, by the vigil they had kept,
As dawn's cool breeze awoke, the young man slept.

Then, as he slept, they carried him once more
And laid him gently on his own hard floor.

lines 3873–93

He woke, he slowly knew himself again –
Astonishment, regret, grief's aching pain
Swept over him (though what could grief achieve?
The scene had fled and it was vain to grieve).
He bared his body, ripped his tattered shirt,
Tore out his hair, besmeared his head with dirt –
And when his friends asked what assailed his heart,
He cried: "How can I say? Where could I start?
No dreamer, no, no seer could ever see
What I saw in that drunken ecstasy;
No one in all the world has ever known
The bliss vouchsafed to me, to me alone –
I cannot tell you what I saw; I saw
A stranger sight than any seen before."
They said: "Try to remember what you've done,
And of a hundred joys describe just one."
He answered: "Was it me who saw that face?
Or did some other stand there in my place?
I neither saw nor heard a thing, and yet
I saw and heard what no man could forget."
A fool suggested: "It's some dream you had;
Some sleepy fantasy has sent you mad."
He asked: "Was it a dream, or was it true?
Was I drunk or sober? I wish I knew –
The world has never known a state like this,
This paradox beyond analysis,
Which haunts my soul with what I cannot find,
Which makes me speechless speak and seeing blind.
I saw perfection's image, beauty's queen,
A vision that no man has ever seen
(What is the sun before that face? – God knows
It is a mote, a speck that comes and goes!).
But did I see her? What more can I say?
Between this 'yes' and 'no' I've lost my way!"

lines 3894–3914

The grieving mother and the sufi

Beside her daughter's grave a mother grieved.
A sufi said: "This woman has perceived
The nature of her loss; her heart knows why
She comes to mourn, for whom-she has to cry –
She grieves, but knowledge makes her fortunate:
Consider now the sufi's wretched state!
What daily, nightly vigils I must keep
And never know for whom it is I weep;
I mourn in lonely darkness, unaware
Whose absence is the cause of my despair.
Since she knows what has caused her agony,
She is a thousand times more blest than me –
I have no notion of what makes me weep,
What prompts the painful vigils I must keep.
My heart is lost, and here I cannot find
That rope by which men live, the rational mind –
The key to thought is lost; to reach this far
Means to despair of who and what you are.
And yet it is to see within the soul –
And at a stroke – the meaning of the Whole."

The man who had lost his key

A sufi heard a cry: "I've lost my key;
If it's been found, please give it back to me –
My door's locked fast; I wish to God I knew
How I could get back in. What can I do?"
The sufi said: "And why should you complain?
You know where this door is; if you remain
Outside it – even if it is shut fast –
Someone no doubt will open it at last.
You make this fuss for nothing; how much more
Should I complain, who've lost both key and door!"
But if this sufi presses on, he'll find
The closed or open door which haunts his mind.

lines 3915–30

Men cannot understand the suns' state,

That deep Bewilderment which is their fate.
To those who ask: “What can I do?” reply:
“Bid all that you have done till now goodbye!”
Once in the Valley of Bewilderment
The pilgrim suffers endless discontent,
Crying: “How long must I endure delay,
Uncertainty? When shall I see the Way?
When shall I know? O, when?” But knowledge here
Is turned again to indecisive fear;
Complaints become a grateful eulogy
And blasphemy is faith, faith blasphemy.

The old age of Sheikh Nasrabad

Sheikh Nasrabad made Mecca’s pilgrimage
Twice twenty times, yet this could not assuage
His yearning heart. This white-haired sheikh became
A pilgrim of the pagans’ sacred flame,
A naked beggar in whose heart their fire
Was mirrored by the blaze of his desire.
A passer-by said: “Shame on you, O sheikh,
Shame on these wretched orisons you make;
Have you performed the Moslems’ pilgrimage
To be an infidel in your old age?
This is mere childishness; such blasphemy
Can only bring the sufis infamy.
What sheikh has followed this perverted way?
What is this pagan fire to which you pray?”
The sheikh said: “I have suffered from this flame,
Which burnt my clothes, my house, my noble name,
The harvest of my life, all that I knew,
My learning, wisdom, reputation too –
And what is left to me? – Bewilderment,
The knowledge of my burning discontent;
All thoughts of reputation soon depart
When such fierce conflagrations fire the heart.

lines 3931–48

In my despair I turn with equal hate
Both from the Ka'abah and this temple's gate –
If this Bewilderment should come to you
Then you will grieve, as I am forced to do."

A novice sees his dead master

A novice in whose heart the faith shone bright
Met with his teacher in a dream one night
And said: "I tremble in bewildered fear;
How is it, master, that I see you here?
My heart became a candle when you went,
A flame that flickers with astonishment;
I seek Truth's secrets like a searching slave –
Explain to me your state beyond the grave!"
His teacher said: "I cannot understand –
Amazed, I gnaw the knuckles of my hand.
You say that you're bewildered – in this pit
Bewilderment seems endless, infinite !
A hundred mountains would be less to me
Than one brief speck of such uncertainty I"

The Valley of Poverty and Nothingness

Next comes that valley words cannot express,
The Vale of Poverty and Nothingness:
Here you are lame and deaf, the mind has gone;
You enter an obscure oblivion.
When sunlight penetrates the atmosphere
A hundred thousand shadows disappear,
And when the sea arises what can save
The patterns on the surface of each wave?
The two worlds are those patterns, and in vain
Men tell themselves what passes will remain.
Whoever sinks within this sea is blest
And in self-loss obtains eternal rest;
The heart that would be lost in this wide sea

Disperses in profound tranquillity,
And if it should emerge again it knows
The secret ways in which the world arose.
The pilgrim who has grown wise in the Quest,
The sufi who has weathered every test,
Are lost when they approach this painful place,
And other men leave not a single trace;
Because all disappear, you might believe
That all are equal (just as you perceive
That twigs and incense offered to a flame
Both turn to powdered ash and look the same).
But though they seem to share a common state,
Their inward essences are separate,
And evil souls sunk in this mighty sea
Retain unchanged their base identity;
But if a pure soul sinks the waves surround
His fading form, in beauty he is drowned –
He is not, yet he is; what could this mean?
It is a state the mind has never seen.

One night that sea of secrets, that loved seer
Of Tous, said to a pupil standing near:
“When you are worn out by love’s fierce despair
And in your weakness tremble like a hair,
You will become that hair and take your place
In curls that duster round the loved one’s face –
Whoever wastes away for love is made
A hair concealed within those tresses’ shade –
But if you will not waste away, your soul
Has made the seven gates of hell its goal.”

A frenzied lover wept; a passer-by
Inquired the cause, and this was his reply:
“They say that when at last the Lord appears,
He will receive, for forty thousand years,
The men who are deserving in this place;

Then from that summit of celestial grace

lines 3967–86

They will return and know themselves once more
Bereft of light, the poorest of the poor.
I will be shown myself – I weep to think
That from such heights to such depths I must sink;
I have no need of my identity –
I long for death; what use is 'T' to me?
I live with evil while my Self is here;
With God both Self and evil disappear.
When I escape the Self I will arise
And be as God; the yearning pilgrim flies
From this dark province of mortality
To Nothingness and to Eternity.
And though, my heart, you bid the world farewell
To cross the bridge that arches over hell,
Do not despair – think of the oil-lamp's glow
That sends up smoke as black as any crow;
Its oil is changed and what was there before
The shining flame flared up exists no more.
So you, my quaking heart, when you endure
These threatening flames, will rise up rare and pure."

First put aside the Self, and then prepare
To mount Boraq* and journey through the air;
Drink down the cup of Nothingness; put on
The cloak that signifies oblivion –
Your stirrup is the void; absence must be
The horse that bears you into vacancy.
Destroy the body and adorn your sight
With kohl of insubstantial, darkest night.
First lose yourself, then lose this loss and then
Withdraw from all that you have lost again –
Go peacefully, and stage by stage progress
Until you gain the realms of Nothingness;
But if you cling to any worldly trace,

No news will reach you from that promised place.

lines 3987–4004

The moths and the flame

Moths gathered in a fluttering throng one night
To learn the truth about the candle's light,
And they decided one of them should go
To gather news of the elusive glow.
One flew till in the distance he discerned
A palace window where a candle burned –
And went no nearer; back again he flew
To tell the others what he thought he knew.
The mentor of the moths dismissed his claim,
Remarking: "He knows nothing of the flame."
A moth more eager than the one before
Set out and passed beyond the palace door.
He hovered in the aura of the fire,
A trembling blur of timorous desire,
Then headed back to say how far he'd been,
And how much he had undergone and seen.
The mentor said: "You do not bear the signs
Of one who's fathomed how the candle shines."
Another moth flew out – his dizzy flight
Turned to an ardent wooing of the light;
He dipped and soared, and in his frenzied trance
Both Self and fire were mingled by his dance –
The flame engulfed his wing-tips, body, head;
His being glowed a fierce translucent red;
And when the mentor saw that sudden blaze,
The moth's form lost within the glowing rays,
He said: "He knows, he knows the truth we seek,
That hidden truth of which we cannot speak."
To go beyond all knowledge is to find
That comprehension which eludes the mind,
And you can never gain the longed-for goal
Until you first outsoar both flesh and soul;
But should one part remain, a single hair

Will drag you back and plunge you in despair –
No creature's Self can be admitted here,
Where all identity must disappear.

lines 4005–22

The sufi who thought he had left the world

A sufi once, with nothing on his mind,
Was – without warning – struck at from behind.
He turned and murmured, choking back the tears:
"The man you hit's been dead for thirty years;
He's left this world!" The man who'd struck him said:
"You talk a lot for someone who is dead!
But talk's not action – while you boast, you stray
Further and further from the secret Way,
And while a hair of you remains, your heart
And Truth are still a hundred worlds apart."
Burn all you have, all that you thought and knew
(Even your shroud must go; let that burn too),
Then leap into the flames, and as you burn
Your pride will falter, you'll begin to learn.
But keep one needle back and you will meet
A hundred thieves who force you to retreat
(Think of that tiny needle which became
The negligible cause of Jesus' shame*).
As you approach this stage's final veil,
Kingdoms and wealth, substance and water fail;
Withdraw into yourself, and one by one
Give up the things you own – when this is done,
Be still in selflessness and pass beyond
All thoughts of good and evil; break this bond,
And as it shatters you are worthy of
Oblivion, the Nothingness of love.

The dervish who loved a prince

A great king had a son whose slender grace
Recalled the comely Joseph's form and face –

He had no rival; none could emulate

lines 4023–41

This prince's dignified and splendid state.
Lords were his slaves; beauty bowed in defeat;
The loveliest were dust beneath his feet,
And if he walked the desert's wastes at night
It seemed a second sun diffused its light.
That he eclipsed the moon's magnificence
Is scant praise for his lovely countenance;
The darkness of his curls was like a well
In which a hundred thousand lovers fell;
The beauty of that hair was like a fire –
A flame that tantalized the world's desire
(But fifty years and more could not suffice
To paint the tumbling curls of paradise).
A glance from those narcissus eyes was like
The searing fire when bolts of lightning strike.
His laugh was honey and his smile could bring
A hundred thousand blossoms news of spring –
But of his wondrous mouth I cannot speak:
There self-hood vanishes; I am too weak.
When he appeared it seemed that every hair
Reduced a hundred hearts to love's despair –
He was far lovelier than words convey;
The world adored him, what more can I say?
When he rode out toward the market-place,
A naked sword was held before his face;
Another followed him; and those who tried
To stand and stare were quickly pushed aside.

There was a dervish, a poor simpleton,
Who fell in love with this great monarch's son –
Too weak to chatter, he would sit and sigh,
Beyond all help and hope, prepared to die.
He sat outside the palace night and day,
But closed his eyes to all who passed that way;

He had no friend, no comrade who could share
Love's pain, or sympathize with his despair.
His heart was broken; tears of silver rolled

lines 4042–60

Down sunken cheeks that looked like sallow gold;
And what kept him alive? At times he'd see
The prince ride by in distant majesty.
Then crowds of people ran from near and far
To gather in the noisy, packed bazaar –
They pushed and shoved; shouts filled the atmosphere,
You'd think that resurrection day was here –
Distracted heralds tried to clear the way,
Raging at stragglers who would not obey –
The ushers yelled, then called the army in,
To clear a mile or so and quell the din.
And when our dervish heard the heralds' sound,
He fainted and lay stretched out on the ground;
It seemed he left himself, and ecstasy
Was strangely mingled with his misery
(Though no one noticed him, there should have been
A hundred thousand mourners at the scene).
His body would turn blue, or to his eyes
Great gouts of blood instead of tears would rise;
His tears would freeze with grief, and then desire
Would make them scald his face like liquid fire.
But how could such a wretch (who begged for bread,
A skinny wraith half living and half dead,
A man with half a shadow, which the sun
Appeared determined to reduce to none)
Expect to be befriended by a prince
Whose like has not been seen before or since?

It happened that one day the prince rode out.
The beggar sent up an ecstatic shout:
"Love's conflagration fills my heart and head;
All patience, reason, strength have turned and fled!"

He raved and ranted, and at every groan
Dashed his bewildered head against a stone,
Until unconsciousness had quenched his sighs
And thick blood spurted from his ears and eyes.
A herald of the prince saw everything,

lines 4061–79

And hurried to denounce him to the king.
“My lord,” he panted, “something must be done;
A filthy libertine adores your son!”
The monarch felt his honour was at stake,
And for his injured reputation’s sake
Cried: “Chain his feet and drag him through the town,
Then from the gibbet hang him upside-down.”
The royal guards set off at once and made
A ring around the hapless renegade –
They dragged him to the public gibbet, where
A huge, blood-thirsty mob had filled the square,
And no one knew his pain, or thought to plead
On his behalf, or tried to intercede.
A courtier brought him to the gallows tree,
Where he screamed out in mortal agony:
“Grant me the time to worship God before
The gallows claims me; let me pray once more.”
The angry courtier signalled his assent
And gave him time to make his testament.
But halfway through his prayers he groaned: “O, why
Should kings decree that guiltless men must die?
Before I’m murdered in this wretched place,
Lord, let me see that boy’s seductive face,
And when he stands here I will gladly give
My soul for him and have no wish to live.
I’d give a hundred thousand lives to see
That princely pattern of nobility;
O God, this is your servant’s last request –
I love, and those who die for love die blest,
And though for him I bid the world farewell,
Love cannot make love’s slave an infidel.

How many countless prayers you grant, dear Lord –
Grant mine; grant my life's vigil its reward!"

This arrow reached its mark; the courtier felt
His adamantine heart begin to melt –
He hurried to the king and there made plain

lines 4080–4100

The secret causes of this sufi's pain,
Weeping, he told how halfway through his prayer
The sufi had succumbed to love's despair.
The monarch's anger passed, and clemency
Made him revoke his former harsh decree.
He turned then to his son and gently said:
"Do not distress this wretch who hangs half dead
Beneath the gibbet's arm – go to him now,
And speak to him as only you know how.
His heart is in your hands; use all your art
To comfort him and give him back his heart.
You were the poisoned draught that seared his throat;
Drink with him now, be poison's antidote!
Let happiness replace his misery;
Renew his life, then bring him here to me."
O, clap your hands, dance, stamp your nimble feet,
Rejoice, prosperity is now complete!
This prince sought out a beggar; this bright sun
Sought out the unregarded simpleton;
This ocean of rich treasures did not stop
Until he had united with a drop!
The prince sped like an angel through the town
And saw the beggar hanging upside-down –
The body shuddered, swayed and fought for breath,
Clinging half conscious at the edge of death.
Beneath the gallows tree his tears and blood
Had clogged the swirling dust to viscid mud,
And seeing him the prince's noble eyes
Flooded with tears that he could not disguise.

He wished to hide them from his army's sight,
But tears in princes are a sign of might.
They flowed like rain and in that moment he
Increased a hundred times his sovereignty.
Endure in love, be steadfast and sincere –
At last the one you long for will appear;
Act as this beggar did, lament and sigh
Until the glorious prince gives his reply.

lines 4103–19

He saw the prince approach from far away
But could not catch the words he tried to say;
He twisted, struggled, raised his face and there
The prince's weeping eyes returned his stare.
He trembled, weak as water with desire;
He shuddered, burnt by love's consuming fire,
And with his last laborious, hoarse breath
Gasped: "Prince, you see me at the point of death –
Your words can kill me now; you did not need
Guards and a gibbet to perform this deed."
Then as a dying candle flares he cried
The last exultant laugh of death and died;
Made one with his beloved he became
The Nothingness of an extinguished flame.
True pilgrims fathom, even as they fight,
The passion of annihilation's night –
Your being here is mixed with nothingness,
And no joy comes to you without distress;
If you cannot endure, how will you find
The promised peace that haunts your troubled mind?
You leapt like lightning once, yet now you stand
Like marshy water clogged with desert sand –
Renew your courage, put aside your fear
And in love's fire let reason disappear.
To be unsure, to pine for liberty,
Is to resist our journey's alchemy.
How long will caution make you hesitate?
Fly beyond thought before it is too late!

To reach that place where true delight is won,
Accept the dervish path as I have done –
I speak of “I”; in truth there is no “I”
Where logic falters and the mind must die.
I lose myself within myself; I seek
For strength in being poor, despised and weak.
When poverty’s bright sun shines over me,
A window opens on reality;
4120–35
I see both worlds and in that light I seem
Like water lost in water’s moving stream.
All that I ever lost or ever found
Is in the depths of that black deluge drowned.
I too am lost; I leave no trace, no mark;
I am a shadow cast upon the dark,
A drop sunk in the sea, and it is vain
To search the sea for that one drop again.
This Nothingness is not for everyone,
Yet many seek it out as I have done;
And who would reach this far and not aspire
To Nothingness, the pilgrim’s last desire?

Nouri was questioned by one pure in soul:
“How far is it until we reach our goal?”
And said: “We pass through fire and splendour first;
Then seven oceans have to be traversed.
A fish* (now listen carefully to me,
And I will show you how to cross this sea)
Will draw you by its breath – a mighty whale,
Vast but invisible from head to tail,
Who deep in solitude delights to swim
And by his breathing draws the world to him”.’

The journey

The hoopoe paused, and when the group had heard
His discourse, trembling fear filled every bird.

They saw the bow of this great enterprise
Could not be drawn by weakness, sloth or lies,
And some were so cast down that then and there
They turned aside and perished in despair.
With fear and apprehension in each heart,

lines 4136–54

The remnant rose up ready to depart.
They travelled on for years; a lifetime passed
Before the longed-for goal was reached at last.
What happened as they flew I cannot say,
But if you journey on that narrow Way,
Then you will act as they once did and know
The miseries they had to undergo.
Of all the army that set out, how few
Survived the Way; of that great retinue
A handful lived until the voyage was done –
Of every thousand there remained but one.
Of many who set out no trace was found.
Some deep within the ocean's depths were drowned;
Some died on mountain-tops; some died of heat;
Some flew too near the sun in their conceit,
Their hearts on fire with love – too late they learned
Their folly when their wings and feathers burned;
Some met their death between the lion's claws,
And some were ripped to death by monsters' jaws;
Some died of thirst; some hunger sent insane,
Till suicide released them from their pain;
Some became weak and could no longer fly
(They faltered, fainted, and were left to die);
Some paused bewildered and then turned aside
To gaze at marvels as if stupefied;
Some looked for pleasure's path and soon confessed
They saw no purpose in the pilgrims' quest;
Not one in every thousand souls arrived –
In every hundred thousand one survived.

The birds arrive and are greeted by a herald

A world of birds set out, and there remained
But thirty when the promised goal was gained,
Thirty exhausted, wretched, broken things,
With hopeless hearts and tattered, trailing wings,

lines 4155–74

Who saw that nameless Glory which the mind
Acknowledges as ever-undefined,
Whose solitary flame each moment turns
A hundred worlds to nothingness and burns
With power a hundred thousand times more bright
Than sun and stars and every natural light.
The awe-struck group, bewildered and amazed,
Like insubstantial, trembling atoms, gazed
And chirmed: ‘How can we live or prosper here,
Where if the sun came it would disappear?
Our hearts were torn from all we loved; we bore
The perils of a path unknown before;
And all for this? It was not this reward
That we expected from our longed-for Lord.’
It seemed their throats were cut, as if they bled
And weakly whimpered until left for dead,
Waiting for splendour to annihilate
Their insubstantial, transitory state.
Time passed; then from the highest court there flew
A herald of the starry retinue,
Who saw the thirty birds, trembling, afraid,
Their bodies broken and their feathers frayed,
And said: ‘What city are you from? What race?
What business brings you to this distant place?
What are your names? You seem destroyed by fear;
What made you leave your homes and travel here?
What were you in the world ? What use are you ?
What can such weak and clumsy creatures do?’
The group replied: ‘We flew here for one thing,
To claim the Simorgh as our rightful king;
We come as suppliants and we have sought
Through grievous paths the threshold of His court –

How long the Way was to complete our vow;
Of thousands we are only thirty now!
Was that hope false which led us to this place,
Or shall we now behold our sovereign's face?'

lines 4175–93

The herald tells the birds to turn back

The herald said: 'This king for whom you grieve
Governs in glory you cannot conceive –
A hundred thousand armies are to Him
An ant that clambers up His threshold's rim,
And what are you? Grief is your fate–go back;
Retrace your steps along the pilgrims' track!'
And when they heard the herald's fearsome words,
A deathly hopelessness assailed the birds;
But they replied: 'Our king will not repay
With sorrow all the hazards of the Way;
Grief cannot come to us from majesty;
Grief cannot live beside such dignity.
Think of Majnoun, who said: "If all the earth
Should every passing moment praise my worth,
I would prefer abuse from Leili's heart
To all creation's eulogizing art –
The world's praise cannot equal Leili's blame;
Both worlds are less to me than Leili's name,"
We told you our desire – if grief must come,
Then we are ready and shall not succumb.'

The herald said: 'The blaze of Majesty
Reduces souls to unreality,
And if your souls are burnt, then all the pain
That you have suffered will have been in vain.'
They answered him: 'How can a moth flee fire
When fire contains its ultimate desire?
And if we do not join Him, yet we'll burn,
And it is this for which our spirits yearn –

It is not union for which we hope;
We know that goal remains beyond our scope.'

The birds narrated then the moth's brief tale:
'They told the moth: "You are too slight, too frail
To bear the vivid candle-flame you seek –

lines 4194–4213

This game is for the noble, not the weak;
Why die from ignorance?" The moth replied:
"Within that fire I cannot hope to hide –
I know I could not penetrate the flame;
Simply to reach it is my humble aim".'

Though grief engulfed the ragged group, love made
The birds impetuous and unafraid;
The herald's self-possession was unmoved,
But their resilience was not reproved –
Now, gently, he unlocked the guarded door;
A hundred veils drew back, and there before
The birds' incredulous, bewildered sight
Shone the unveiled, the inmost Light of Light.
He led them to a noble throne, a place
Of intimacy, dignity and grace,
Then gave them all a written page and said
That when its contents had been duly read
The meaning that their journey had concealed,
And of the stage they'd reached, would be revealed.

Joseph's brothers read of their treachery

When Malek Dar bought Joseph as a slave,
The price agreed (and which he gladly gave)
Seemed far too low – to be quite sure he made
The brothers sign a note for what he'd paid;
And when the wicked purchase was complete

He left with Joseph and the sealed receipt.
At last when Joseph ruled in Egypt's court
His brothers caine to beg and little thought
To whom it was each bowed his humbled head
And as a suppliant appealed for bread.
Then Joseph held a scroll up in his hand
And said: 'No courtier here can understand
These Hebrew characters – if you can read
This note I'll give you all the bread you need.'

lines 4214–31

The brothers could read Hebrew easily
And cried: 'Give us the note, your majesty!'
(If any of my readers cannot find
Himself in this account, the fool is blind.)
When Joseph gave them that short document
They looked – and trembled with astonishment.
They did not read a line but in dismay
Debated inwardly what they should say.
Their past sins silenced them; they were too weak
To offer an excuse or even speak.
Then Joseph said: 'Why don't you read? You seem
Distracted, haunted by some dreadful dream.'
And they replied: 'Better to hold our breath
Than read and in so doing merit death.'

The birds discover the Simorgh

The thirty birds read through the fateful page
And there discovered, stage by detailed stage,
Their lives, their actions, set out one by one –
All that their souls had ever been or done:
And this was bad enough, but as they read
They understood that it was they who'd led
The lovely Joseph into slavery –
Who had deprived him of his liberty
Deep in a well, then ignorantly sold
Their captive to a passing chief for gold.

(Can you not see that at each breath you sell
The Joseph you imprisoned in that well,
That he will be the king to whom you must
Naked and hungry bow down in the dust?)
The chastened spirits of these birds became
Like crumbled powder, and they shrank with shame.
Then, as by shame their spirits were refined
Of all the world's weight, they began to find
A new life flow towards them from that bright
Celestial and ever-living Light –

lines 4232–54

Their souls rose free of all they'd been before;
The past and all its actions were no more.
Their life came from that close, insistent sun
And in its vivid rays they shone as one.
There in the Simorgh's* radiant face they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
They were the Simorgh and the journey's end.
They see the Simorgh – at themselves they stare,
And see a second Simorgh standing there;
They look at both and see the two are one,
That this is that, that this, the goal is won.
They ask (but inwardly; they make no sound)
The meaning of these mysteries that confound
Their puzzled ignorance – how is it true
That 'we' is not distinguished here from 'you'?
And silently their shining Lord replies:
'I am a mirror set before your eyes,
And all who come before my splendour see
Themselves, their own unique reality;
You came as thirty birds and therefore saw
These selfsame thirty birds, not less nor more;
If you had come as forty, fifty – here
An answering forty, fifty, would appear;
Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,
It is yourselves you see and what you are.'

(Who sees the Lord? It is himself each sees;
What ant's sight could discern the Pleiades?
What anvil could be lifted by an ant?
Or could a fly subdue an elephant?)
'How much you thought you knew and saw; but you
Now know that all you trusted was untrue.
Though you traversed the Valleys' depths and fought

lines 4255–71

With all the dangers that the journey brought,
The journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine –
You slept secure in Being's inmost shrine.
And since you came as thirty birds, you see
These thirty birds when you discover Me,
The Simorgh, Truth's last flawless jewel, the light
In which you will be lost to mortal sight,
Dispersed to nothingness until once more
You find in Me the selves you were before.'
Then, as they listened to the Simorgh's words,
A trembling dissolution filled the birds –
The substance of their being was undone,
And they were lost like shade before the sun;
Neither the pilgrims nor their guide remained.
The Simorgh ceased to speak, and silence reigned.

The ashes of Hallaj

Hallaj's corpse was burnt and when the flame
Subsided, to the pyre a sufi came
Who stirred the ashes with his staff and said:
'Where has that cry "lam the Truthhl* now fled?
All that you cried, all that you saw and knew,
Was but the prelude to what now is true.
The essence lives; rise now and have no fear,
Rise up from ruin, rise and disappear –
All shadows are made nothing in the one
Unchanging light of Truth's eternal sun,'

A hundred thousand centuries went by,
And then those birds, who were content to die,
To vanish in annihilation, saw
Their Selves had been restored to them once more,
That after Nothingness they had attained

lines 4272–90

Eternal Life, and self-hood was regained.
This Nothingness, this Life, are states no tongue
At any time has adequately sung –
Those who can speak still wander far away
From that dark truth they struggle.to convey,
And by analogies they try to show
The forms men's partial knowledge cannot know.
(But these are not the subject for my rhyme;
They need another book, another time –
And those who merit them will one day see
This Nothingness and this Eternity;
While you still travel in your worldly state,
You cannot pass beyond this glorious gate.)
Why do you waste your life in slothful sleep?
Rise up, for there is nothing you can keep;
What will it profit you to comprehend
The present world when it must have an end?
Know He has made man's seed and nourished it
So that it grows in wisdom until fit
To understand His mysteries, to see
The hidden secrets of Eternity.
But in that glorious state it cannot rest –
In dust it will be humbled, dispossessed,
Brought back to Nothingness, cast down, destroyed,
Absorbed once more within the primal void –
There, lost in non-existence, it will hear
The truths that make this darkness disappear,
And, as He brings man to blank vacancy,
He gives man life to all eternity.
You have no knowledge of what lies ahead;

Think deeply, ponder, do not be misled –
Until our king excludes you from His grace,
You cannot hope to see Him face to face;
You cannot hope for Life till you progress
Through some small shadow of this Nothingness.
First He will humble you in dust and mire,
And then bestow the glory you desire.

lines 4291–4312

Be nothing first! and then you will exist,
You cannot live whilst life and Self persist –
Till you reach Nothingness you cannot see
The Life you long for in eternity.

The king who ordered his beloved to be killed

There was a monarch once of seven lands,
A second Alexander, whose commands
Sent armies forth from pole to pole, whose might
Eclipsed the splendour of the moon at night.
He had a minister whose wise advice
Was well-informed, sagacious and precise.
This minister was father to a son,
A beauteous youth, a peerless paragon;
No man has ever seen such comely grace
As glanced out from that boy's bewitching face
(He dared not leave the palace save at night
For fear of causing some tumultuous fight;
Since all the world began no youth has known
The love, the adoration, he was shown).
His face was like the sun; his curls like dusk,
A twilight scented with delicious musk;
His little mouth was fresher than the brook
That gives eternal life, and in his look
A hundred stars seemed gathered as a guide
To tempt whoever saw him to his side;
His thick, spell-binding hair spilled down his back
In twisted tresses, glistening smooth and black;

And round his face the clustered ringlets seemed
Like little miracles a saint had dreamed;
His eyebrows' curve was like a bow (what arm
Could ever draw it or resist its charm?),
The eyes themselves a sorcery to quell
A hundred hearts with their hypnotic spell;
His lips were like the freshet that bestows
A sweet, new life on spring's reviving rose;

lines 4313–34

His youthful beard was like the fledgling grass
That re-emerges where spring's runnels pass;
His serried teeth were like… O, who but fools
Would try to represent such shining jewels!
And on his cheek there was a musk-like mole,
That seemed a portent of Time's hidden soul;
What can I say? – no eloquence conveys
A beauty that surpassed all mortal praise.
His king caught sight of him – and passion made
This monarch like a drunken renegade.
That full moon caused his sovereign to appear
As thin as is the new moon, wan with fear.
His love obsessed the king; a moment spent
Without that youth was torture, banishment –
He could not rest away from him; desire
Destroyed his patience in its raging fire.
He sat the boy beside him day and night,
Whispering secrets till the last dim light
Left that beloved face – when darkness fell,
Sleep did not touch this sovereign sentinel;
And when the boy's head drooped the monarch kept
A guardian vigil while his servant slept,
The face lit by a candle's softening light
Watched by the weeping king throughout the night.
The king threw blossoms in his loved one's hair,
Or combed it hour by hour with tender care,
And then for sudden love would cry aloud,
Weep tears like raindrops scattered from a cloud,

Or make a public banquet for the boy,
Or drink with him alone, in secret joy –
He could not bear to be without his face,
To see him absent for a moment's space.
The youth chafed inwardly, but he was tied
By terror to his royal master's side,
Afraid that if he went away but once
The king would hang him for his impudence
(Even his parents were afraid to say

lines 4335–55

They wished to see their son from day to day –
They dared not offer succour or support
To one who seemed the prisoner of the court).

There was a girl at court, a lovely child
Who filled the room with sunlight when she smiled.
This youth caught sight of her, and like a fire
Love kindled his impetuous desire.
One night (the king was drunk) he slipped away
And in her room the two together lay.
At midnight, though the king could hardly stand,
He staggered out, a dagger in his hand,
And searched the court, prowling from place to place,
Until he found them locked in love's embrace.
Then hate and love could not be held apart;
Wild flames of jealousy swept through his heart.
'How could you choose another love?' he cried,
'What idiocy is this, what selfish pride?
To think of all that I have done for you
(Far more than any other man would do!).
Is this then my reward? – Continue, please!
You're expert at it, everyone agrees!
But think – my coffer's key was in your hand;
My noblemen were under your command;
I ruled with your assistance and consent;
You were my closest friend, my confidant;

And yet you sneak in secret to this whore –
Foul slave, you are my confidant no more!'
He paused, then ordered that the youth be bound
And dragged in chains along the filthy ground –
The silver pallor of his lovely back
Was at the king's commandment beaten black,
And where his throne had been the soldiers built
The gibbet that would show the world his guilt.
'First flay the faithless wretch,' their monarch said,
'then hang him upside-down until he's dead –
And then those chosen for my love will see

lines 4356–74

Their eyes should glance at no one else but me.'
The monarch's courtiers hurried to comply –
Gasping, head down, the youth was left to die.

But when the minister, his father, heard
The punishment this lover had incurred,
He wept and cried: 'What harsh necessity
Has made the king my son's sworn enemy?'
Two slaves had seized the boy – to them he went,
To them he made his fatherly lament,
And as he gave them each a pearl he said:
'drink has confused our noble monarch's head;
He will regret my son's uncalled-for fate,
But when he's sober it will be too late;
Whoever kills my son will then be killed.'
They said: 'If his commands are not fulfilled,
It's we who'll die – if he comes here and sees
No bloody corpse, the next deaths he decrees
Are ours!' The wily minister then brought
A murderer, convicted by the court,
Who waited in a prison-cell for death –
They stripped the villain, flayed him, stopped his breath,
Then hanged him upside-down until the mud
Beneath the gibbet reddened with his blood

(The boy was hidden in a private place
Till it was safe for him to show his face).

The next day dawned; the king was sober now,
But anger still stamped furrows on his brow.
He called the slaves and asked: 'What did you do
With that abhorrent dog I gave to you?'
They said: 'We flayed the wretch, then hanged him where
The court could witness his last, cruel despair –
He hangs there now, my lord, head down and dead.'
The king rejoiced to hear the words they said
(He there and then made each of them a lord,
And gave them presents as a fit reward).

lines 4375–98

'Let him hang there,' he cried, 'till late tonight –
There is a lesson in this shameful sight!'
But when his people heard the tale they felt
Their hearts in surreptitious pity melt;
They came to stare, but none could recognize
The youth in that hacked corpse which met their eyes.
They saw the beaten, blood-stained flesh but kept
Their thoughts a secret and in secret wept;
All day the city mourned with smothered cries,
Tears hastily suppressed and inward sighs.

A few days passed; the king's rage vanished too,
And as his anger went his sorrow grew –
Love made him weak; this lion-hearted king
Became an ant, afraid of everything.
Then he remembered how they used to sit
For days and nights, when love seemed infinite,
Drinking their wine in homely privacy,
And more drunk with each other's company –
He could not bear the thought; he felt tears rise
To overflow his weeping, downcast eyes.

Regret consumed him; reason, patience fled,
And in the dust he bowed his noble head.
He dressed in mourning, neither ate nor slept,'
But, shut away in lonely anguish, wept.
Night came; he drove off that still-gaping crowd
Which stood beneath the gallows tree, and, bowed
By lonely grief, told over one by one
The actions of his absent paragon.
Then as each loved, lost deed was called to mind,
He groaned that he had been so rash, so blind.
Pain gripped his heart; his tears flowed like a flood;
He smeared his features with the corpse's blood,
Grovelled in dust, clawed at his pampered skin,
Wept countless storms for his unthinking sin –
He raved, and, as a candle burns away,
Wasted with grief until the break of day,

lines 4399–4422

And when dawn's gentle breeze arose returned
To his apartments' hearth, and still he burned.

For forty nights the ashes of despair
Reduced him to the stature of a hair;
For forty nights none dared approach the throne
Or speak to him, and he was left alone.
For forty days he fasted, then one night
He dreamt he saw the boy – his face was white
And smeared with trickling tears; from foot to head
Were blood-stains where his gaping wounds had bled.
The king cried: 'Comfort of my soul, what chance
Reduced you to this evil circumstance?'
'I am like this,' the weeping boy replied,
'Because of your ingratitude and pride –
Is this fidelity, to flay my skin
For some imagined slight, some paltry sin?
Is this how lovers act? No infidel
Would make his lover undergo such hell;

What have I done that I should hang and die,
A shameful spectacle to passers-by?
God will revenge my death; I turn away
But I shall face you on His Judgement Day!'
The king woke trembling from his troubled sleep;
Grief overwhelmed him; he began to weep
And in his wretched agony he saw
Insanity swing open like a door.
He cried: 'Dear heart and soul, your shameful death
Bereaves my heart and soul of vital breath –
You loved me and you died for me; what fool
Would smash, as I did, his most precious jewel?
0, I have killed my only love, and I
Deserve to suffer torture and to die!
Wherever you are now, my child, do not
Let all our vows of friendship be forgot;
It was myself I killed! Do not give back
The blackness of my deeds with deeds as black;

lines 4423–41

It is for you I grieve, for you I groan,
For you I bow down in the dust alone –
Take pity on me now; where can I find
Some trace of you to comfort my poor mind?
I tricked you, but be bountiful and true –
Do not serve me as once I dealt with you.
I spilt your body's blood, but you have spilt
My spirit's blood to expiate my guilt –
The deed was done when I was drunk; some fate
Conspired against me and my sovereign state.
If you have left the world before me, how
Can I endure the world without you now?
One moment's absence kills my life and heart;
One moment more, my life and body part –
Your king's soul hovers ready now to pay
-Blood-vengeance for your death and die away!
O, it is not my death which troubles me,
But my unthinking, vicious treachery;

However long I beg and sue and plead,
I know that nothing can forgive this deed.
O God, that you had cut my throat, that I
Untouched by grief had been condemned to die!
My soul is burnt with passion and despair;
There is no part of me that does not bear
The scars of wild regret – how long, O Lord,
Must absence be my fate and my reward?
Just God, destroy me now; I gladly give
My soul to death; I have no will to live.'
He fell bewildered in a strengthless faint,
And silence closed his passionate complaint.
But help was near; the minister had heard
Each conscience-stricken and repentant word –
He slipped out from his hiding-place and dressed
His son as if he were some honoured guest,
Then sent him to the king. The youth appeared
Like moonlight when the heaven's clouds have cleared;
Dressed all in white he knelt before the king,

lines 4442–55

And wept as clouds weep raindrops in the spring.
Then, when the wakened monarch saw the boy,
There were no words that could express his joy.
They knew that state of which no man can speak;
This pearl cannot be pierced;* we are too weak.
The absence that the king endured was gone
And they withdrew, united now as one.

No stranger followed them, or could unfold
The secrets they to one another told –
Alone at last, together they conferred;
Blindly they saw themselves and deaf they heard –
But who can speak of this ? I know if I
Betrayed my knowledge I would surely die;
If it were lawful for me to relate
Such truths to those who have not reached this state,

Those gone before us would have made some sign;
But no sign comes, and silence must be mine.
Here eloquence can find no jewel but one,
That silence when the longed-for goal is won.
The greatest orator would here be made
In love with silence and forget his trade,
And I too cease: I have described the Way –
Now, you must act – there is no more to say.

BIOGRAPHICAL INDEX

This includes most of the characters unfamiliar to western readers to whom Attar refers, together with entries on one or two well-known figures (e.g. Joseph) whose role in Islamic literature differs slightly from the western conception of their legends. It has not been possible to trace a few characters; some of these (e.g. Sheikh Noughani) probably had a purely local fame in Neishapour. Attar may have invented Abbasseh – he gives her no provenance and reports no anecdotes about her.

Ibrahim Adham: Abou Eshaq Ibrahim ibn Adham was a prince born in Balkh who renounced the world and lived as a wandering dervish. The similarity of his story to that of the Buddha has often been remarked on, and it is of especial interest because Balkh had been a Buddhist area. He died *c.* 782. He is the Abou ben Adham of Leigh Hunt's poem, and the story on which this is based is told in Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Auliya.* (p. 133)

Ayaz: Ayaz ibn Aymaq Abou-Najm was the favourite slave of Sultan Mahmoud of Ghazna *(q.v.).* Though Ayaz actually existed (he died in 1057), his life was quickly overlaid with legend. His story became the archetypal tale of the slave raised to the highest honours by his king; his relationship with Mahmoud is used as a metaphor of the mystic's relationship with God. The story obviously appealed to Attar, who returns to it frequently, (pp. 55–6, 158–9, 175–6, 194 – 6)

Azar: the father of Abraham, who lived by carving idols, (p. 93, 161) *Bayazid* (Bistam): see the Introduction, 13–14. (76–7, 126–7, 145, 150) *Dar* (Malek Dar): *see Joseph,* (p. 217)

Dinar: Malek ibn Dinar was the son of a Persian slave. He was taught by Hasan of Basra, who had known many of the Companions of the Prophet. He achieved fame as a calligrapher; perhaps this is what Attar is referring to when he has Malek

Dinar say that he receives his bread 'from God's own hands', as he was a copyist of the Koran. He died *c.* 748. (pp. 99–100)

Gharoun: Korah in Numbers Ch. 16. (p. 90)

Ghouri: see *Sanjar.* (p. 134)

Hallaj: see the Introduction, p. 12–13. (pp. 114, 220)

Hanbal: Ahmad ibn Mohammad ibn Hanbal was one of the most important Islamic theologians and the founder of one of the four schools of orthodox Islam. He was born in 780 in Baghdad and died in the same city in 855. (pp. 135–6)

Jacob: the pain of separation from someone dearly loved is a common metaphor in Persian poetry for the soul's longing for God; Jacob's longing for his son Joseph is frequently used as an example of this. (pp. 50, 139, 170)

Joseph: the favourite son of Jacob, he was hidden in a well by his jealous brothers and sold to Malek Dar, who took him to Egypt. Here he became overseer of the state granaries (Attar seems to believe he also became king). The stories of his relationship with Zuleikha *(q.v.)* and his confronting his brothers with their treachery are frequently alluded to in Persian poetry. He was of unsurpassed beauty, and for this reason beautiful heroes (and heroines) are usually compared to him. Joseph is the most frequently mentioned character in *The Conference of the Birds,* closely followed by Mahmoud of Ghazna; in both cases. Attar is dearly interested in the same themes: physical beauty (Joseph and Ayaz), gratitude, authority tempered by understanding and mercy, (pp. 31, 50, 58, 59, 104, 132–3, 138–9, 142, 163–4, 170, 197, 207, 217 – 18)

Junaid: Abou'l Qasim ibn Mohammad ibn al-Junaid was one of the most celebrated of sufis and the chief expounder of the 'sober' school of sufism. Of the state of *fana* or annihilation in God he wrote: 'For at that time thou wilt be addressed, thyself addressing; questioned concerning thy tidings, thyself questioning' and it is interesting to compare this with what happens when Attar's birds reach the Simorgh. He died in 910. (pp. 115, 123)

Kherghani (or Khergan; Attar gives both forms): Abou'l Hasan Kherghani was a Persian sufi of the late tenth and early eleventh

centuries. He lived near Bistan in north-west Iran. (pp. 127–8, 130)

Khezr: the immortal guardian of a spring whose waters bestow immortality. His original name, al-Khadir, means 'the green man' he is clearly a figure from pre-Islamic legend, and parts of his story recall the tale of Utnapishtim in *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* (p. 31, 38, 39)

Khosroe: the name of at least three of the Sassanian kings who ruled Iran from 229 to 652. Like the name Caesar it came to mean any emperor or important king. (p. 44)

Leili and her lover *Majnoun* are the archetypal lovers in Arabic, Persian and Turkish poetry. The story is originally Arabic. They were the children of hostile tribes, and their association was forbidden by Leili's father. Majnoun, driven mad by love, lived on the fringes of the desert among wild animals; both lovers eventually died of grief. There are many narrative poems based on this story, the most famous being that of the Persian poet Nezami. Majnoun's madness is a frequent symbol in Islamic mystical poetry of the soul's longing for God. (p. 169, 174, 216)

Loghman of Sarrakhs: one of the 'wise madmen' *(aqala majaniri)* who were companions of Abou Sa'id Aboul Kheir *(q.v.* under *Mahna)*. (pp. 193–4)

Mahmoud: Sultan Mahmoud of Ghazna (the ruins of Ghazna are in modern Afghanistan, on the road from Kandahar to Kabul) reigned from 998 to 1030. During this period he considerably extended the area over which he ruled. He invaded and conquered much of north-west India, and when he died his kingdom stretched from Samarqand to Kashmir. A poet himself, he filled his court with poets and philosophers; his relationship with Ayaz *(q.v.)* is celebrated in many Persian poems. Attar obviously thought of him as a benign and tolerant ruler, but the historical Mahmoud was, according to E. G. Browne, 'greedy of wealth… fanatical, cruel to Moslem heretics as well as to Hindus (of whom he slew an incalculable number), fickle, and uncertain in temper'. See *also Joseph,* (pp. 44, 81–3, 136–7, 146–7, 158–9, 160–62, 171–2, 175–6, 184, 194 – 6)

Mahna: a small town in Khavaran, a province of Khorasan; 'Manna's

sheikh' was the important poet Abou Sa'id Aboul Kheir, who lived in the eleventh century and is credited with having been the first to use the mystical themes and metaphors that became typical of Persian sufi poetry, (pp. 123, 170)

Majnoun: seeLeili.

Mas'oud: many kings, particularly of Ghazna, were called by this name, and there is no way of knowing which one Attar had in mind in his story of Mas'oud and the fisherboy. At least two manuscripts give the story to Sultan Mahmoud. (pp. 79–80)

Nasrabad: Abou'l Ghasem Ibrahim Nasrabadi, a mystic of the tenth century, (pp. 202–3)

Nimrod: the enemy and oppressor of Abraham. He was defeated by an army of gnats sent by God; one entered his brain and by its buzzing sent him mad. (pp. 29, 87, 185)

Nouri: Abou'l Hosain Ahmad ibn Mohammad Nouri was a sufi of Baghdad, prominent in the circle which gathered around Junaid *(q.v.)*. He died in 908. (p. 213)

Rabe'eh (pronounced as three syllables, the last rhyming with 'way'): Rabe'eh bint Esmail al-Adawiya, one of the first and most important woman mystics of Islam. She lived in the eighth century. As a child she was sold into slavery, and she spent most of her life in great poverty in Basra. She became famous in her own lifetime for her piety and was visited by other contemporary mystics. She is credited with the introduction of the theme of Divine Love into Islamic mysticism, and if this is true her influence on the subsequent course of sufism is incalculable. There is an interesting book in English on her life by Margaret Smith, *Rabi'a the Mystic and her Fellow Saints* (Cambridge, 1928). (pp. 86, 104, 159–60, 172)

Roudbar: Abou All Ahmad ibn Mohammad ibn alQasem ibn Mansour alRoudbari, a sufi of the tenth century, (pp. 157–8)

Saleh: a prophet, mentioned in the Koran, sent to an Arab tribe. God also sent the tribe a she-camel which Saleh said they should feed and water. Instead they killed it, and a storm followed by a destructive earthquake punished their lack of belief, (p. 29)

Sam'an: the story of Sheikh Sam'an is easily the longest in Attar's

poem. Attar sometimes calls him Sam'an and sometimes San'an. Dr Sadegh Gouharin makes the interesting suggestion that the name Sam'an is taken from a monastery of that name near Damascus. He also suggests that the story is modelled distantly on that of a Sheikh ibn Sagha who travelled to Rome and became a Christian. Attar's story made a great impression on his early audience and was taken as a factual narrative – so much so that Attar himself was said to have been one of the sheikh's disciples who followed him to Rome. (pp. 57–75)

Sanjar: a Seljuk prince who ruled over Khorasan from 1096 to 1157. He expanded his kingdom until it included all of the Seljuk empire (i.e. virtually all of Islamic Asia) and was formally proclaimed king at Baghdad on 4 September 1119. The later years of his reign were marred by successful rebellions against his rule. To the north-east his possessions were constantly threatened by the kings of Ghour, and it is possible that the rivalry between the obscure 'sheikh Ghouri' and Sanjar in Attar's story is to some degree a metaphor for this struggle. If Attar was born in about 1120 he was Sanjar's subject for the first thirty years or so of his life. (p. 134)

Shebli: Abou Bakr Dolaf ibn Jahdar al-Shebli was well-born and entered the service of the Baghdad court. Later he joined the group of sufis associated with Junaid *(q.v.)* and became known for his extravagant behaviour, for which eventually he was confined in an asylum. He died in 946. (pp. 93, 111–12, 169)

Tarmazi: Abou Abdallah Mohammad ibn Ali ibn al-Hosain al Hakim al-Tarmazi has been called 'one of the outstanding creative thinkers of Islamic mysticism' (A. J. Arberry). He taught at Neishapour and indirectly influenced both al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi. He lived during the latter part of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth centuries, (pp. 126–7)

Tousi: Abou Ali al-Fazl ibn Mohammad Faramadi of Tous (a small town near Mashhad in Khorasan) was a sufi of the eleventh century associated with the poet and mystic Abou Sa'id Aboul Kheir. (pp. 164–5, 204)

Vasati: Abou Bakr Mohammad ibn Mousa alVasati was a sufi of the tenth century, (p. 144)

Yusef of Hamadan: a companion of Abou Ali Faramadi of Tous; he lived in the eleventh century and died on the road to Merv, a city in southern Russia, near Samarqand. Hamadan is in western Iran on the site of the ancient Ecbatana. (pp. 170, 186)

Zuleikha: the woman known in the Bible as Potiphar's wife. Her illicit love for Joseph, who by virtue of his perfect beauty was considered a symbol of the Divine, is often used as a metaphor for the soul's need for God. (163–4)

Zulghamin: his story is told in the eighteenth chapter of the Koran, where he is represented as a lawgiver and the conqueror of Yajuj and Majuj (Gog and Magog), (p. 32)

Zulnoon: Abou't-Faiz Thauban ibn Ibrahim al-Mesri was an Egyptian who lived from *c.* 796 to 859. He travelled in Syria and Iraq and was for a time imprisoned for heresy at Baghdad; after his release he returned to Egypt, where he died. He is credited by later Islamic mystics with having been one of the first and most important of their number; he also had a reputation as an alchemist, (pp. 130–31)

* *A Literary History of Persia* (1906; Cambridge, 1928 edition), Vol. 2, 509.

* op. cit., Vol. 2, 319.

* A reference to the Companion of the Cave. During a period of danger the Prophet Mohammad and a close companion, Abou Bakr, hid for a while in a cave on Mount Thaur. In mystical poetry this episode became a symbol of withdrawal from the world.

* ‘In the name of God’: the opening words of the Koran.

* A mythical bird whose shadow would fall on a future king.

† Two of the most illustrious of the legendary kings of ancient Persia.

* Blue was the colour of mourning in ancient Persia; the epic poet Ferdowsi (loth-nth centuries) mentions it as being worn by the first of the legendary Persian longs, Keyumars, when in mourning for his son Siyamak.

† A stream that flows through paradise.

* A building of grey stone at the centre of the great mosque in Mecca, circumambulated by every pilgrim seven times. It is the geographical centre of Islam.

* The *zonnar,* a belt or cord worn by Eastern Christians and Jews; thus a symbol of heresy.

* i.e. the dervish cloak.

* A goddess in pre-Islamic Arabia, lines 1919–35

* The angel of death.

* The last four lines of this passage are Attar's paraphrase of a poem by Hallaj. In this and the following anecdote Attar juxtaposes the attitude to death of the 'ecstatic' mystic (Hallaj) and that of the 'sober' mystic (Junaid).

* It was at Kerbelah that Husain, the son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, was killed. Husain refused to swear allegiance to the Caliph Yazid; he and his followers were surrounded at Kerbelah, and a swift decisive battle resulted in victory for Yazid's troops. It is Husain's death which is remembered with such fervour by Shi'a Moslems through the mourning month of Moharram. Before the battle Husain's water-supply was cut off, and he and his followers suffered greatly from thirst. During Moharram, and particularly on the anniversary of Husain's death, many Moslems will refuse to drink in commemoration of this thirst. It is this memory which is behind the otherwise rather obscure anecdote about the sufi who refused to touch sherbet, which precedes the mention of Kerbelah.

* *Sirat*: a hair-thin bridge over the pit of hell. The good will be able to cross it; the wicked will slip and plunge into the pit (cf. the ‘brig o’ dread’ in the *Lyke Wake Dirge)*.

* The metaphor is based on the notion of blood-money. A murder could be compensated, if the victim's relatives agreed, by payment of a sum of money; God destroys the dervishes, then pays for this 'crime' with His love; He will continue to do this until He has no more love to give, i.e. for ever.

* Actions or (more particularly) sayings of the Prophet Mohammad. The scholar's task is to sort out which are genuine.

* i.e. God.

* Two angels who question the dead on their faith.

* Lat was the name of an Arabian pre-Islamic goddess. Mahmoud attacked and conquered Somnat in north-west India in 1026 and destroyed the Hindu temple there; Attar has either confused the Arabian and Indian deities, or used the name ‘Lat’ generically, or has been seduced by the fortuitous rhyme.

* The devil.

* The *zonnar* (see the note on 61).

* The comparison depends on a pun; to ‘feed on blood’ is to ’suffer’,

*The fabulous beast the Prophet mounted on the night of his ascent to heaven

* Jesus had a needle with him when he entered heaven, breaking God's prohibition on earthly possessions.

* It is possible that this refers to Jesus. Jesus' breath is an important element in Moslem stories about Him (it was reputed to have vivifying powers), and it may be that Attar had heard of the Christian use of the fish to signify Jesus.

* This crucial moment depends on a pun: si means ‘thirty’, *morgh* means ‘bird(s)’ the si *morgh* see the ’simorgh’. It was probably this pun which suggested the idea of the poem to Attar.

* Hallaj was executed for, among other things, crying out ‘I am the Truth’ while in a state of religious exaltation.

* The stringing of pearls on a necklace is a stock metaphor in Persian verse for the writing of poetry; Attar is suggesting that this particular ‘pearl’ is beyond the scope of his, or any, poem – it is too difficult for him to ‘pierce’.